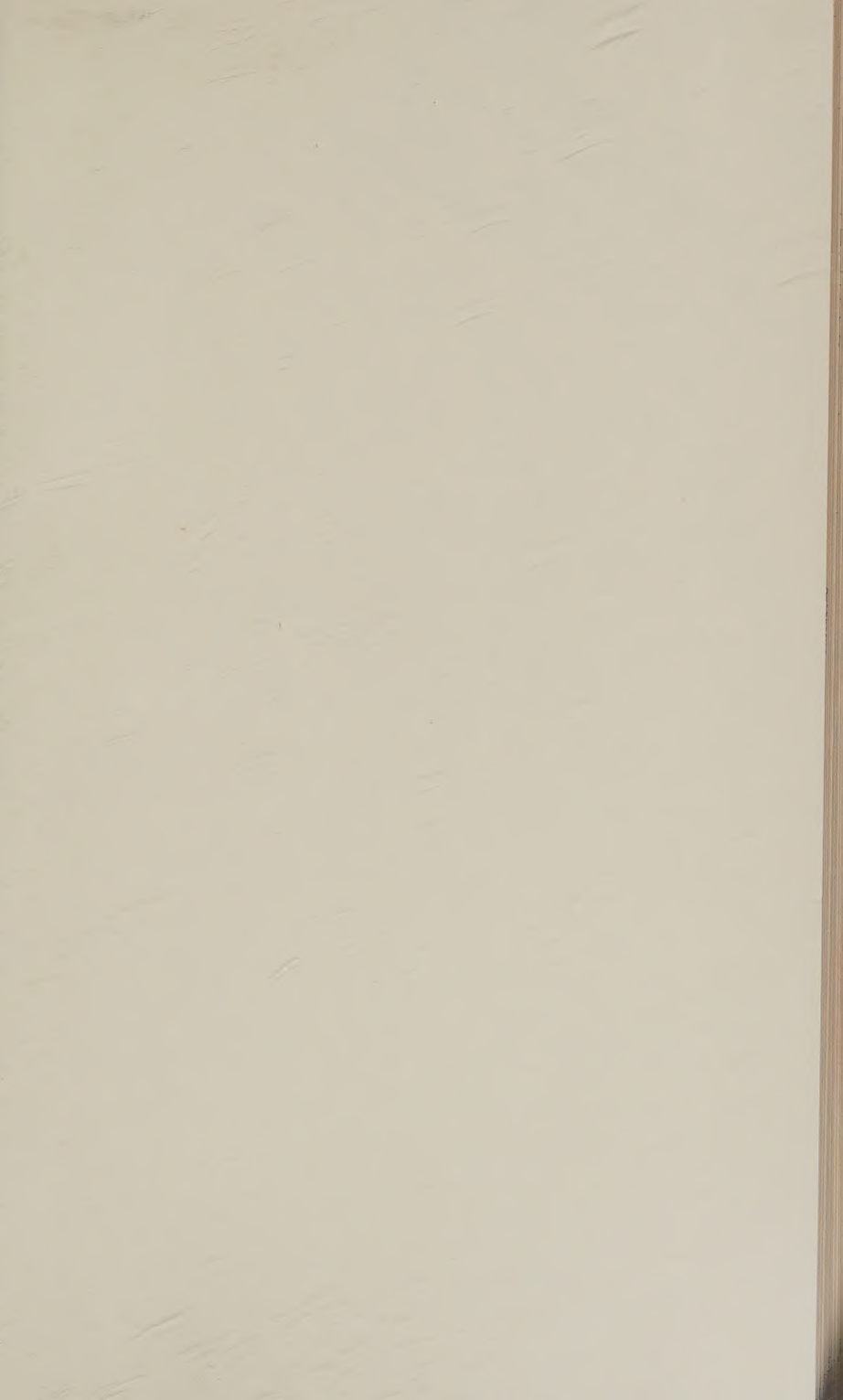


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GEORGE THOMSON

*The Friend of Burns*









# GEORGE THOMSON

The Friend of Burns

HIS LIFE & CORRESPONDENCE

BY

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## P R E F A C E

GEORGE THOMSON was so intimately connected with the last years of Robert Burns that the lack hitherto of any biography of the man is somewhat surprising. All that is generally known about him is derived from works on Burns, and in these it has happened, rather by misconception than from malice, that he has been placed in a far from favourable light. It is my aim in this volume to present for the first time a full and true picture of George Thomson. If it be objected by some that Thomson was of no such individual importance as to need a biography, I can only hope that the justification of my volume will be furnished by the interest of those pages which deal with his close and long-continued relations with greater men. In particular, I hope that every student of Burns will take pleasure in my disproof of the allegations commonly brought against Thomson's treatment of the poet. It is not unadvisedly that I have adopted for my sub-title a phrase of Lockhart's, and called Thomson "the friend of Burns."

The materials for the Life having been necessarily, for the most part, collected at first hand, it is not surprising that several scraps of information have come to light too late for incorporation in

the text. These I have collected in an Appended Note placed at the end of the volume.

The correspondence now published has been put into my hands by Mrs. Thomson-Sinclair, of Dunbeath Castle, Caithness, whose relationship to George Thomson is explained in the Life. It is, however, but right to say that the editing of it was undertaken at the suggestion of her cousin, Miss Chalmers, of Rothie Brisbane, Fyvie, Aberdeenshire. All the letters and extracts are printed from the originals with the following exceptions: Scott, Hogg, Byron, Moore, Campbell, Lockhart, Mrs. Burns, Gilbert Burns, Beethoven, and Haydn. In the case of these the letters are printed from copies made for me by Miss Chalmers; and while I have no reason to doubt that the transcripts are literally and verbally correct, I think it advisable to make this explanation in view of the possibility of the originals coming by-and-by into other hands. For Thomson's own letters I have had the use of his letter-books—four calf-bound folios, the first volume opening with the year 1803, and the last extending to the year 1850.

In dealing with the correspondence generally, my plan has been to give rather too much than too little. I am well aware that to some readers certain portions of it may seem trivial and perhaps dull. I would, however, ask such readers to believe that what is uninteresting to them may for sufficient reasons be of considerable interest to others. Even as it is, I shall probably not have contented the specialists. Sir George Grove, for



example, whom I consulted as the leading Beethoven authority in this country, assured me that I must "print every word that Beethoven wrote." I have not in any case printed every word; but readers, Sir George Grove and others, may be satisfied that what I have not printed is the driest of dry bones.

The Burns - Thomson correspondence, being already so well known and so easily accessible in various editions of the poet, I have not thought it necessary to print at all. From the British Museum annual report, just issued, I learn that amongst recent acquisitions are "the proof-sheets of the correspondence between Burns and George Thomson, annotated by the latter." The annotations are no doubt those which were made for Dr. Currie; but I am unwilling to delay the issue of my volume for the sake of a possibly vain inquiry into their history.

It only remains for me to acknowledge the help I have received from various hands in the course of the work. First I must mention my friend Mr. George H. Ely, whose frank criticism and whose practical interest in the book, both in MS. and proof, it is impossible for me too gratefully to acknowledge. To Mr. Ely I am indebted for the translation of the Beethoven correspondence, and indeed for the casting into form of the matter in that section from p. 322 to p. 344. To Mr. C. E. S. Chambers, of Messrs. W. & R. Chambers, I owe the courtesy of being allowed to copy several letters of George Thomson addressed to Robert Chambers.

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These letters have enabled me to add certain particulars to the Life which otherwise I should have found it difficult to obtain. To Mr. A. W. Inglis, the present Secretary of the Board of Manufactures, I owe the information as to Thomson's salary at various periods. This has never been published, and it is—as I believe I have shown—of much direct value in its bearing on the question of Thomson's pecuniary treatment of Burns. The extracts from the Banff records referring to Thomson's father have been made for me by Mr. James Grant, LL.B., solicitor and Town Clerk of Banff, to whom my warmest thanks are due. To my friends Mr. A. H. Millar, of the *Dundee Advertiser*, Mr. F. G. Edwards, editor of the *Musical Times*, and Mr. James Love of Falkirk, I am obliged for much generous and helpful assistance. Other incidental obligations are acknowledged in the text and footnotes.

J. C. H.

EDINBURGH, *November* 1897.

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## GEORGE THOMSON

WRITING in 1838 to Robert Chambers in answer to a request for some particulars of his life and work, George Thomson, then an octogenarian, declared that he could not believe himself so old as a numbering of the years since his fancied birth-date proved him to be. Age, however, is reckoned by years, and not by faith; and a right enumeration gave the "brisky juvenal" two more summers even than he supposed. To Chambers he stated his birth-year as 1759, desiring perhaps, like Hogg, to share a date with Robert Burns. But parish records are fatal to sentiment, and the Dunfermline register of births gives the hard fact as follows :

1757. Mr. Robert Thomson, schoolmaster at Limekilns, had a son born to him of Anne Stirling, his wife, March 4th and baptized 6th, named *George*. Witnesses Rolland Cowie, wigmaker in Dunfermline, and Mr. Andrew Reeky, preceptor to the children of Mr. Robert Wellwood of Easter Gellet, advocate.

Thus George Thomson came into the world in the year of Plassey, fathered by a schoolmaster, and a schoolmaster for one of his sponsors. These connections will have a recurring interest as we

note by-and-by the pedagogic tendencies in our hero's own character. That Thomson was baptized at Dunfermline and not at Limekilns is explained by the circumstance that there was then no church, and probably no meeting-house, in the latter place. The Secession body were alone represented in Limekilns, and it was not until 1784 that even they held a separate existence there. Before that date they were associated with the congregation of Queen Anne Street, Dunfermline, and it has been suggested that Robert Thomson made one of the members of this congregation. It might count for something if it could be shown that the Thomson family, father and son, were really connected with the Secession Church. But the former at any rate could hardly be a Secessionist in days when it was a *sine quâ non* of his office that the schoolmaster should be a Churchman; while as for the latter, we know what to infer from that reference to the "canting old Seceder," upon which we shall stumble later on.

Of George's early years absolutely nothing is recorded. The position of schoolmaster in a little Fifeshire parish could not have been of great emolument, and there is very good reason for supposing that the family had but too intimate an acquaintance with the chill penury which was then the not uncommon experience of the race to which Goldsmith's village oracle belonged. When the boy was in his fifth year, Robert Thomson, no doubt to better himself, moved northwards to Banff. What tempted him to go so far is clear from the local records. It

appears that in February 1762 the magistrates and Town Council of Banff, taking into consideration "the increase of the inhabitants and number of children sent to this place for education," resolved to establish three additional schools within the burgh—one "for teaching writing, accompts, book-keeping, the principles of mathematics and navigation"; another "for teaching the English language according to the new or English method, under the direction of a master, with nine pounds sterling of yearly salary to him"; and a third for teaching "white and coloured seam," under the direction of a schoolmistress. The minute records that, with the view of securing "proper qualified candidates, the tenor of this Act and the minute of Council shall be advertised in the Edinburgh and Aberdeen newspapers," with an intimation to applicants that they are to appear at Banff, "with proper recommendations of their moral character," on the 15th of April, "in order to a trial of their qualifications." How many candidates responded to the Council's advertisements, or what was the nature of the "trial," it is impossible to determine. All we know is that Robert Thomson left Limekilns to teach "the English language according to the new or English method" at Banff.

The "new schoolmaster," as we find from the treasurer's accounts, received his first payment on the 26th of June; and on the 9th of August the Council discussed his finances. We have already seen that his salary from the town was to be £9 per annum; it was now decided that there should



be paid to him in addition "for each scholar learning to read English according to the new method eighteenpence sterling quarterly." We gather further that the treasurer had paid him on his arrival two guineas "for defraying his expenses in coming north," and later on had advanced him £6, 10s. "in respect of his being a stranger, and to enable him to provide necessaries for his family." Alas! it is only of such pecuniary embarrassments that the Banff records now inform us. On the 10th of February 1765 the kirk-session "give ten shillings to Robert Thomson, master of the English school, to assist in paying the funeral charges of his wife, he being in indigent circumstances." Things, in short, went hardly with the dominie, though, to be sure, his "indigent circumstances" did not prevent his marrying again. His salary remained stationary, his family increased; and on the 19th of November 1772 he appeared before the Council to sign a deed of renunciation, "having a view of departing from this place as at Whitsunday next, in hopes of obtaining a better settlement." There is no further trace of the "new schoolmaster" in Banff; but according to his son George, he, with a credulity common to needy professional men, remained there until 1774 engaged in "some mercantile means of enlarging his income." Meeting with no success in that direction, he then took the venturesome step of removing to Edinburgh, where he exchanged the schoolmaster's gown for the livery of a messenger-at-arms. After this we lose sight of him entirely. There is not a single reference to him in the extant

correspondence of his son; nor, so far as I can ascertain, is his death recorded in any of the then existing media for such notices. Of George's mother I have been unable to learn anything; as to his stepmother there is no occasion to inquire. In 1772 a son was born of the second marriage, and of him we hear a good deal afterwards in connection with the musical life of Inverness. As there will be no need to mention Keith Thomson again, the following extract from the *Inverness Courier* of November 22, 1855, may be given here:

DEATH OF MR. KEITH THOMSON, MUSIC-MASTER.—Many of our readers, both at home and abroad, will learn with regret, though scarcely with surprise, that this venerable citizen has at length departed from among us. Mr. Thomson died on the 17th inst., aged 83. He was one of the gentlest and most amiable of men, retiring and unobtrusive, but as a teacher of music, a citizen, and elder of the Church, he was regarded with the highest esteem and respect. Mr. Thomson was a half-brother of Mr. George Thomson, the correspondent of Burns, and, like him, was enthusiastically devoted to music. The magistrates of Inverness induced him to teach here, guaranteeing him a sum of £40 per annum; and arriving in 1795, Mr. Thomson taught for the long period of sixty years.

Of this half-brother mention is not once made in George Thomson's correspondence; nor does he appear, as we might expect, among the contributors to the National Collections. One brother, William, became a major in the Royal Engineers; another, David, became an artist, and will come into our story again by-and-by. There must have been

other brothers or sisters, judging from references to the "increasing family," but of these there is no trace in the correspondence or elsewhere. Probably Paton Thomson, described by Redgrave as "an English engraver, born about the middle of the eighteenth century,"<sup>1</sup> was a brother. I suggest this not only because several of the plates in George Thomson's collections are engraved by him, but also because in letters of David, the artist, he is always referred to familiarly by his Christian name. But there is nothing in the correspondence to enable us to establish the relationship, and I must be content to leave it an open question.

Young Thomson was in his seventeenth year when he arrived with his family in Edinburgh. He had been fairly educated, first no doubt by his father, and then at the Grammar School of Banff, where, as he informs us, he learnt the dead languages. From his letter-books I at first concluded—hastily, as it appears—that he could both read and write French, in which language most of the letters to and from Beethoven are written; and that he could at least read Italian, in which Haydn usually, and Beethoven occasionally wrote. With regard to Italian, we have nothing by which to decide except the request which Thomson once specially made to Beethoven to write only in French. But in regard to French we are left in no doubt: we have his own confession that he did not know the language. Writing from Paris in August 1819, he tells his

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<sup>1</sup> See Redgrave's *Dictionary of the English School*; also Bryan's *Dictionary of Painters and Engravers*.

wife—"When I jumped upon French ground I felt a curious and rather an unpleasant sensation. Here, thought I, am I going among a people who will scarce understand a word I say, and whose language will be nearly unintelligible to me, but I must just blether on as I best can, and draw largely on the patience and politeness of those to whom I address myself." It is clear, therefore, that Thomson in his intercourse with the Continental composers must have had the assistance of some one with an intimate knowledge of French. That he is not in these pages credited with the possession of this knowledge himself, is due solely to the fortunate discovery at the last moment of a number of letters giving an account of a visit to the Continent, from one of which the above quotation is made.

It is hardly likely, considering the circumstances of the family, that Thomson was allowed to reach his seventeenth year without earning his wage; but there are no means of ascertaining in what occupation he was employed on leaving the Banff school. In Edinburgh he was ere long engaged in the office of a Writer to the Signet; and in 1780, when he was twenty-three, he was fortunate enough, through the influence of John Home, the author of *Douglas*, to secure the post of junior clerk to the Board of Trustees for the Encouragement of Art and Manufactures in Scotland.

Since it was in this office that Thomson spent the whole of his after business life, it will be well to indicate here what precisely was the nature of the institution—what was its origin and what were

its functions. The Board of Trustees owed its existence to an article of the Treaty of Union with England. By that article it was agreed that, among other provisions for giving Scotland an equivalent for the increase of Customs and Excise duties, a sum of £2000 should be applied for some years, by the new Imperial Parliament, towards the encouragement and formation of manufactures in the coarse wool of those counties that produced it, the amount to be afterwards wholly employed towards "encouraging and promoting the fisheries and such other manufactures and improvements in Scotland as may conduce to the general good of the United Kingdom." In 1727 twenty-one trustees were appointed under letters patent; and the institution, after passing through a period of some difficulty, emerged at last on a prosperous career.

In 1766 the British Linen Hall was opened by the Trustees for the Custody and Sale of Scottish Linens, which the owners thereof might sell either personally or by their factors. "For whatever period the goods should remain unsold," says Arnot, the historian of Edinburgh, "their respective owners pay nothing to the proprietors of the hall, but upon their being sold, five per cent. upon the value of the linens sold is demanded by way of rent. As the opening of this hall was found to be attended with good consequences to the linen manufactures, so in 1776 the trustees extended it upon the same terms to the woollen manufactures of Scotland." The business of the Board was continued pretty much on these lines until 1828, when new letters patent



were issued giving the trustees a wider discretion, and empowering them to "apply their funds to the encouragement not only of manufactures but also of such undertakings in Scotland as should most conduce to the general welfare of the United Kingdom." It was under the fostering care of the Board of Manufactures that the Scottish School of Design sprang up in 1760—the first school of design established in the three kingdoms at the public expense. It was also with the money of the Board, and mainly for the Board's accommodation, that the Edinburgh Royal Institution was reared; and Lord Cockburn was certainly right in his contention that this building should have been named after the old historical Board of Trustees. The "Trustees' Hall" had been the title, ever since the Union, of the place in the old town where the Board were in the habit of meeting.

This, then, was the institution to which George Thomson gave the working years of his life. Not long after he became connected with it the principal clerk died, and Thomson, succeeding to his post, remained in the office until his retirement in 1839, having then completed a term of fifty-nine years' service. He began work in 1780 with a salary of £40 per annum; in 1784 the amount was increased to £70; in 1794 to £100; and in 1797 to £150. In 1824, as we shall find later on, he was being paid £300. When he retired, he received a pension amounting to his full pay at that time of £420. The bearing of some of these facts will be seen afterwards.

Thomson's official life was as uneventful as in

the nature of the case the life of a victim of routine must be. A situation in a public office, as Hazlitt has told us, is laborious and mechanical, and void of the two great springs of life, hope and fear. Nevertheless, it secures a competence, and leaves leisure for the practice of the most engaging pursuits of idleness. Thomson seems to have found his work pleasant and his superiors considerate, and apparently his duties were so little laborious that he could devote a good deal of business time to his hobby. We hear no complaints of being chained to the desk's dead wood, as in the case of Charles Lamb; but on the other hand, when Thomson "went home—for ever" in 1839, we do not learn that he was fain, like Elia, to visit his old desk-fellows, or that he felt remorse at quitting the faithful partners of his toil. "The brain of a true Caledonian is constituted upon quite a different plan."

On several details in his own career Thomson was most provokingly inaccurate. We have seen how he understated his age at eighty-one; it seems that his memory kept him equally ill informed about the date of his marriage. He says that he married when he was twenty-five, which, as he believed that he was born in 1759, brings out the year as 1784. The date was in fact the 11th of December 1781, when the bridegroom had been a year in the employment of the Board, and was receiving the handsome salary of £40 per annum. One is inclined to think that Thomson must have added to his income by "perquisites" in some way. It is almost inconceivable that he should have set up house upon



the modest salary which made the classic village preacher "passing rich." But the suggestion is entirely conjectural. The bride, then in her twentieth year, was Miss Katherine Miller, the daughter of a lieutenant in the 50th Regiment, and a native of Kelso. She is said to have been a great beauty, and to have been the "toast" of Edinburgh before her marriage; and the Raeburn portrait at Dunbeath Castle is certainly that of a handsome woman. Indeed, she has been so described to me by one who remembers her well, and remembers also the devoted way in which her husband attended her. By this lady Thomson had two sons and six daughters, regarding whom all that it is necessary to say may as well be said at once.<sup>1</sup> Robert, the elder son, entered the army, and attained the rank of lieutenant-colonel of Engineers. A son of his, the Rev. Frederick Forsyth Thomson, a retired naval chaplain, is the only male descendant

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<sup>1</sup> The following record of his family is from Thomson's Bible, now in the hands of Mrs. Thomson-Sinclair: Katherine, the eldest, born 1783, died young; Alsie, the second, born 1785, died same year; Robert, the eldest son, born 1786; Margaret, third daughter, born 1787; Anne, fourth daughter, born 1788; William, second son, born 1790; Georgina, fifth daughter, born 1793; Helen, sixth daughter, born 1795. For a more detailed account of the family, see Rogers' *Book of Robert Burns*, ii. 283. Rogers must, however, be taken with caution. He says Thomson had only five daughters, and he blunders most unaccountably in regard to Keith Thomson, the half-brother already mentioned. He calls him "uterine brother of George Thomson," and gives the date of his death rightly enough as "November 1855, at the age of eighty-three." But a "uterine brother" is a brother by the same mother, of a different father. And yet Rogers tells us, again rightly enough, that Robert Thomson came with his family to Edinburgh in 1774, when the "uterine brother" would be two years old!

of George Thomson now living. William, the younger son, joined the Civil Service, and became assistant-commissary-general. He served in Germany, in the West Indies, in Canada, and in Malta, and was ultimately employed in the Audit Office in London. He married Barbara Sinclair, an heiress, whose name it was a condition of the marriage that he should take. On the death of her only brother she succeeded to the estate of Freswick in Caithness. There was one child of this marriage, William Thomson-Sinclair, and it is through his widow that the correspondence of George Thomson is now brought to light.

Thomson's daughters have been spoken of as "pleasant and accomplished women"; Anne and Helen are often referred to as possessing musical gifts of a high order. Special mention must be made of Georgina, who on the 1st of June 1814 was married to George Hogarth, the musical critic and historian, then a W.S. in Edinburgh.<sup>1</sup> A daughter of that union became in 1836 the wife of Charles Dickens. The novelist's children are thus the great-grandchildren of the "clean-brushed, commonplace old gentleman in scratch wig" whom Carlyle "spoke a few words to, and took a good look of" as a young man visiting Annan in com-

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<sup>1</sup> Hogarth gave up the law in 1831. About 1834 he settled in London and became sub-editor and music critic of the *Morning Chronicle*. For twenty years (1846-66) he was music critic of the *Daily News*. A sister of his was the wife of James Ballantyne, Scott's "Aldiborontiphoscophornio." In the notice of Hogarth in the *Dictionary of National Biography* George Thomson is oddly described as the "biographer of Beethoven"!

pany with Irving. There is a letter of Burns, written to Thomson in July 1793, in which the poet, speaking of the first volume of Thomson's Scottish Collection, then recently published, says :

Allow me to congratulate you now as a brother of the quill. You have committed your character and fame, which will now be tried for ages to come by the illustrious jury of the SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF TASTE—all whom poesy can please or music charm. Being a bard of nature, I have some pretensions to second sight ; and I am warranted by the spirit to foretell and affirm that your great-great-grandchild will hold up your volumes and say with honest pride : "This so much-admired selection was the work of my ancestor."

One may doubt whether Burns' prediction has been fulfilled in this particular ; but in any case, it was a tolerably reasonable anticipation compared with some of the astonishing forecasts which were afterwards to be made by certain poetical correspondents who allowed themselves to be carried away by the flatteries of the Edinburgh clerk.

Thomson's domestic life seems, from the absence of any hint to the contrary, to have been passed in placid content. Mrs. Thomson had one great security for a quiet existence in the fact that her husband had a hobby. Music, indeed, is not always the genius of harmony at the fireside. Mrs. Merrythought in the old play is driven to forsake the husband who "lives at home, and sings and hoits and revels" among his drunken fiddlers, with never a penny in his purse. George Thomson's passion for music assumed a soberer form. It fired him to collect

the national tunes of his country, and, not satisfied with that, shot him off on flights of search for the tunes of Ireland and Wales. Long before his hobby took this form, however, he seems to have identified himself with the musical life of Edinburgh. We have no account of his musical abilities other than that which he furnishes himself, but it is evident that, whatever may have been his theoretical attainments, he was in practice a very capable amateur. His instrument was the violin, upon which several people still living remember him as playing remarkably well.<sup>1</sup> He speaks very early of his "Cremona," but whether he possessed a "Cremona" at that time seems doubtful: the term is often used in a loose way as merely a synonym for violin. Mrs. Thomson-Sinclair says: "He had a 'Cremona,' of which he was very proud. It was sold after his death, but I can give no particulars, as there is no catalogue of the sale in existence." The references in the correspondence are unfortunately anything but clear on the point. In 1814 his brother David writes: "Your Forster<sup>2</sup> has been at Norris' almost ever since your violin was there—I believe before. A gentleman offered twenty guineas for the Forster, but I have not heard of any offer for the Amati." Thomson, as we shall subsequently discover, was in pecuniary straits about this time, and the probability is that he was attempting to secure a little money

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<sup>1</sup> "He played beautifully on the violin, which was always beside him," says Mrs. Annie Dowie, a daughter of Robert Chambers, to me in a letter.

<sup>2</sup> This was doubtless a violoncello or a double bass.

by the sale of his instruments. Later on, in 1824, his brother William writes : "I am glad to find your Parisian purchase turn out so well in the opinion of so good a judge as Allday. There was a Stradivarius to be had at Davis' some months ago for £50. It was acknowledged by all the world to be one." Whatever we may think of these references, it is certain that two years before his death, a patriarch of ninety-two, Thomson was making efforts to secure an indubitable specimen of old Italian workmanship. In the year 1849 he was endeavouring to sell the copyright of certain compositions (to be dealt with afterwards) which Beethoven had written for him ; and in a letter to Messrs. Breitkopf & Härtel, the music publishers of Leipzig, he says : "I have long wished to possess an old violin of the best quality by Stradivarius or Joseph Guarnerius. If you have a violin of either master of undoubted originality and in good preservation, I would give you all the MSS. of Beethoven above mentioned in exchange for the instrument." As the MSS. in question were valued by Thomson at one hundred and twenty-five ducats (say £62), it is evident that Cremona violins were not then the costly things that they are now, when an instrument of "undoubted originality and in good preservation" can seldom be procured under £1000. The Leipzig firm was unwilling to purchase the Beethoven MSS., and Thomson's last two years were not solaced by the desired "Cremona."

What his skill with the violin was we have just seen. He was a vocalist as well. In his leisure



hours, he tells us, he used "to con over our Scottish melodies and to devour the choruses of Handel's oratorios, in which, when performed at St. Cecilia's Hall, I generally took a part.<sup>1</sup> . . . I had so much delight in singing these matchless choruses and in practising the violin quartets of Pleyel and Haydn that it was with joy I hailed the hour when, like the young amateur in the good old Scotch song, I could hie me hame to my Cremona and enjoy Haydn's admirable fancies." Upon these concerts at the St. Cecilia Hall he dwells with loving reminiscence in many communications to his friends and correspondents. Late in life he wrote a special account of them for Robert Chambers, and in a private letter accompanying the manuscript he says :

I have added my own name to the note as to the gentlemen who sung in the choruses of the oratorios, as I was one of them regularly ; and laborious practice at home did they cost me. Many were the times and oft that I sung myself hoarse as a raven at "Wretched Lovers !" "Behold the Monster, Polypheme," &c. I almost wept for sweet Galatea when the amorous giant hurled a rock at the head of his beloved Acis, and deaved the whole house with my din singing the sorrows of the young lovers. Do try your hand on Handel's choral fugues when you have a mind to puzzle yourself.

In another letter to Chambers he speaks of his recollections as referring to "the Augustan age of music in Auld Reekie," upon which he looks back

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<sup>1</sup> Thomson's voice was a bass, as we gather from a reference in a letter of 1848 : "I with my poor old voice will take the bass part [in certain quartets], though perhaps you will hear pipes and whistles in the sound."

with "indescribable pleasure," as forming the one green spot in the field of his musical memory.<sup>1</sup>

These St. Cecilia concerts of which Thomson makes so much were a notable institution in the Edinburgh of a hundred years ago and earlier. He calls the undertaking "one of the most interesting and liberal musical institutions that ever existed in Scotland or indeed in any country," and allowing a little for excusable exaggeration the claim may be admitted. The concerts, to quote from Chambers (*Traditions of Edinburgh*), were attended by "all the rank, beauty, and fashion of which Edinburgh could then boast"; and in addition to the professional performers, "many amateurs of great musical skill and enthusiasm, such as Mr. Tytler of Woodhouselee, were pleased to exhibit themselves for the amusement of their friends, who alone were admitted by ticket." Thomson himself, writing in 1847, says:

Let me call to mind a few of those whose lovely faces at the concerts gave us the sweetest zest for music: Miss Cleghorn of Edinburgh, still living in single blessedness; Miss Chalmers of Pittencrief, who married Sir William Miller of Glenlee, Bart.; Miss Jessie Chalmers of Edinburgh, who married William Pringle of Haining; Miss Hay of Hayston [Scott's first love], who married Sir William Forbes, Bart.; Miss Murray of Lintrose, who was called the Flower of Strathmore, and upon whom

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<sup>1</sup> There is a letter of George Farquhar Graham to Chambers, dated 9th December 1846, warning Chambers that Thomson's memory was failing and that he was not to be implicitly trusted as to all he might say about the St. Cecilia concerts. Graham, however, as we shall see, had some reason for not regarding Thomson in the most friendly manner.

Burns wrote the song "Blythe, blythe, and merry was she"; Miss Jardine of Edinburgh, who married Home Drummond of Blair Drummond; Miss Kinloch of Gilmerton, who married Sir Foster Cunliffe of Acton, Bart.; Miss Lucy Johnston of East Lothian, who married Mr. Oswald of Auchincruive; Miss Halket of Pittferran, who became the wife of the celebrated Count Lally Tollen-dall; and Jane, Duchess of Gordon, celebrated for her wit and spirit as well as her beauty. These, with Miss Burnett and Miss Home, and many others whose names I do not distinctly recollect, were indisputably worthy of all the honour conferred upon them.

In their first form these aristocratic gatherings were known as "The Gentlemen's Concerts." Councillor Pleydell in *Guy Mannering* is a member of "The Gentlemen's Concert," "scraping a little upon the violoncello." At first the place of meeting was the upper room of St. Mary's Chapel in Niddry's Wynd; but by the year 1762 the Society, whose history went as far back as 1728, had so increased in popularity that a hall, named after the patron saint of music, was specially built at the foot of the wynd. Lord Cockburn in his *Memorials* says this hall was "the only public resort of the musical, and besides being our most selectly fashionable place of amusement was the best, the most beautiful concert-room I have ever yet seen. And there have I myself seen most of our literary and fashionable gentlemen predominating with their side curls and frills, and ruffles, and silver buckles; and our stately matrons stiffened in hoops and gorgeous satins; and our beauties with high-heeled shoes, powdered and pomatumed hair, and lofty and composite head-



dressess. All this was in the Cowgate, the last retreat, nowadays, of destitution and disease." The hall was designed on the plan of the Grand Opera House at Parma, though, of course, on a smaller scale. The annals of the Society which met regularly within its walls are not without records of scenes which later generations know only at Burns celebrations. Some of its members, like the "common singing-men" of Bishop Earle, "roared deep in the choir, deeper in the tavern." Its palmiest days were the days when convivial knights-errant used to "save the ladies" by toasting their idols in a bumper from glasses of "vast length." The deepest drinker "saved" his lady; and Thomson, speaking of the suppers at Fortune's Tavern, which generally followed the performance of an oratorio, declares that the bold champion had often considerable difficulty in "saving" himself from the floor in his efforts to regain his seat.

The concerts went on until the spring of 1798, by which time, owing to the attractions of the New Town, it was beginning to be felt that Niddry's Wynd was not quite a convenient *locale* for a concert-room. In 1801 the Society was formally wound up, and next year the hall was sold to the Baptists. In 1809 it was purchased by the Grand Lodge of Scotland; in 1844 by the Town Council as trustees for Dr. Bell's Trust; and now (1897) it has been converted into a warehouse. It has thus seen a good many changes since George Thomson and other grave amateurs of his time made music within its doors; but enough of the

original remains to show how admirably the place was adapted for concert purposes.<sup>1</sup>

I have dwelt at this length upon the old St. Cecilia concerts, not only because of the practical share which Thomson had in them, but because it was in Niddry's Wynd that he conceived the idea which dominated the rest of his life, and but for which posterity would in all probability never have heard his name. So important is this part of his story that his own account of it may be given in full. In the little paper written for Robert Chambers, he says :

At the St. Cecilia concerts I heard Scottish songs sung in a style of excellence far surpassing any idea which I had previously had of their beauty, and that, too, from Italians, Signor Tenducci the one, and Signora Domenica Corri the other. Tenducci's "I'll never leave thee" and "Braes of Ballenden," and the Signora's "Ewe-Bughts, Marion," and "Waly, Waly," so delighted every hearer that in the most crowded room not a whisper was to be heard, so entirely did they rivet the attention and admiration of the audience. Tenducci's singing was full of passion, feeling, and taste, and, what we hear very rarely from singers, his articulation of the words was no less perfect than his expression of the music. It was in consequence of my hearing him and Signora Corri sing a number of our songs so charmingly that I conceived the idea of collecting all our best melodies and songs, and of obtaining accompaniments to them worthy of their merit.

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<sup>1</sup> An illustration of the interior of the hall is given in Grant's *Old and New Edinburgh*, i. 251. The view is, however, misleading, as it makes prominent (evidently believing it to have been the orchestra) a gallery above the doorway which could have formed no part of the arrangements of the hall when in the hands of the musical society. Cf. Marr's *Music for the People*, p. xxix.

Tenducci — one remembers how Humphrey Clinker heard him, "a thing from Italy"—comes in for compliment again and again. "He it was," remarks Thomson in a letter of 1838 to Robert Chambers, "he it was who inoculated me for Scottish song. Oh that Mrs. Chambers had heard him! He would have beguiled her of her tears as he oft drew mine. I have heard all the great singers of the last fifty years, and not one of them surpassed him for singing to the heart." Again, in a letter of 1844 to William Tait, the publisher,<sup>1</sup> we read:

The most judicious charmingly expressive singer of Scottish songs I ever had the pleasure of listening to was Signor Tenducci, whose passionate feeling and exquisitely touching expression of the melody was not more remarkable than his marked delivery of the words, which he spoke as effectively as a Kemble would have recited them. If I were to live ever so long I could not forget the effect of his performance of "Roslin Castle," "Lochaber," or "The Braes of Ballenden." The only young lady whose expressive singing brings Tenducci to my remembrance is the amiable and talented Miss Jane Wilson, of Maitland Street.

There is an unconscious irony in the statement that the beauty of Scottish song was first revealed

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<sup>1</sup> There was good ground, by the way, for Thomson's intimacy with the Taites. Mr. John Glen, of Edinburgh, informs me that William played the flute. "His abilities," says Mr. Glen, "I do not know, but I suspect he was of the old school, from his having flutes in all keys to enable him to avoid difficult scales." On the same authority Charles B. Tait, a brother of the publisher, was a 'celloist, and had frequent musical gatherings at his house. Thomson, we may be pretty sure, often carried his fiddle to both houses.

to Thomson by a couple of Italians ; but the musical Edinburgh of his day, as indeed it has always been to some extent, was dominated mainly by foreigners. There was Christoff Schetky, the principal 'celloist of the St. Cecilia Society ; there was Pietro Urbani ; there were various members of the Corri family ; there were Tenducci and others, all Continental artists, and all more or less intimately associated with the music of the capital ; while only the Gows and Stephen Clarke and such like had a footing as representing the native element in art. Tenducci was very fond of singing Scotch songs, and there is a unity of testimony to the fact that he sang them very well. He came to Edinburgh to take part in the St. Cecilia concerts in 1768, and he appeared regularly before the Society for some time after. All the while he was giving lessons in singing, and one of his pupils, it is interesting to note, was the Alexander Campbell who so miserably failed to teach psalmody to Sir Walter Scott owing to the "incurable defects" of the novelist's ear. The Corris were rather a numerous and confusing family, but the one with whom Thomson had specially to do was Natale Corri, a brother of the more famous Domenico, whose wife had charmed him by her singing at the hall in Niddry's Wynd.

How long it was before the notion thus dimly shadowed in Thomson's mind developed into the fixed determination to collect and edit the melodies of his country, we cannot ascertain. Before setting out on his independent task, he examined, he tells

us, every collection within his reach, and found them "all more or less exceptionable—a sad mixture of good and evil, the pure and the impure." Generally "there were no symphonies to introduce and close the airs, and the accompaniments (for the piano or harpsichord only) were meagre and commonplace, while the words were in a great many cases such as could not be tolerated or sung in good society." The collections thus referred to may be identified with tolerable certainty, for the number of such works up to Thomson's time was by no means great.

There would be first of all the *Orpheus Caledonius* of William Thomson, the first edition of which was issued in 1725, a second following in 1733. In the 1725 edition Thomson pilfered his lyrics, without any acknowledgment, from Allan Ramsay's *Tea-Table Miscellany*. This Thomson (there were three Edinburgh Thomsons connected with three separate collections of Scottish song !) was an Edinburgh musician, who in the early years of the century went to London, where he acquired some fame as a singer. Burney has a reference to him in his well-known *History of Music*, which is not without interest here. He says (iv. 647): "In February [1722] there was a benefit concert for Mr. Thomson, the first editor of a collection of Scots tunes in England. To this collection, for which there was a very large subscription, may be ascribed the subsequent favour of these national melodies south of the Tweed." A poor collection it was, in all conscience, but it had at least the



merit of being a pioneer in a field which was then but thinly cultivated.

After Thomson, the next collector of any note was James Oswald, who published several sets of "Scots tunes," and notably (c. 1742-1759), his *Caledonian Pocket Companion*. If George Thomson went to Oswald for guidance he was certainly in danger of going astray. Oswald had no idea of preserving the airs in their original form, but "decked them out with embellishments in order to display the skill of the singer." Moreover, with the view no doubt of securing additional celebrity for certain melodies in his collection, he passed them off as the composition of the luckless David Rizzio, who was just enough of a musician to give a plausible appearance to the trick. Oswald's impositions in this way are pointedly referred to in a poetical epistle addressed to him in the *Scots Magazine* for October 1741. Scott certainly knew of them, as we gather from the following in the *Fair Maid of Perth*: "It's no a Scotch tune, but it passes for ane. Oswald made it himsel', I reckon—he has cheated mony ane, but he canna cheat Wandering Willie." Oswald, it may just be added, was originally a teacher of music, first in Dunfermline and then in Edinburgh. About 1741 he settled as a music publisher in London, where he attained the distinction of "chamber composer" to George III., a distinction which in those days was as little a proof of merit as it was to hold the office of poet-laureate.

The collections of Pietro Urbani and William Napier came quite close to George Thomson's

venture in the matter of date. Urbani's name has survived in certain references of Burns, but for which it would probably have been entirely forgotten. An Italian singer and music teacher resident for some years in Edinburgh, he was both a good musician and a good vocalist. He had the distinction of being practically the first person who attempted at great cost to get up some of Handel's oratorios in the Scottish capital. Burns seems to have met him for the first time in 1793, when he was on his tour in Galloway. In that year at anyrate the poet wrote to Thomson regarding him: "He is, *entre nous*, a narrow, conceited creature, but he sings so delightfully that whatever he introduces at your concert [*i.e.* the St. Cecilia concerts] must have immediate celebrity." In the same letter Burns remarks to Thomson that Urbani "looks with rather an evil eye" on his collection, which was likely enough, seeing that Urbani and Thomson were both rivals for public favour. Thomson no doubt reciprocated the feeling. From a letter of his to Kozeluch, dated February 28, 1800, it appears that some one, whom Thomson suspected to be Urbani, had written to the composer to ask if the accompaniments which Thomson had ascribed to him were really from his pen. "You astonish me," says Thomson, "by the letter which you mention respecting the songs. It has either been written by an Italian here who has published a water-gruel collection of these songs, and would see me at the devil on account of my collection; or by another worthy



gentleman, Mr Dale, whom I exposed in the newspapers for publishing a parcel of trash which he called Sonatas with Scottish airs by Pleyel, of which Pleyel did not write one note. And being in the habit of borrowing a composer's name to cheat the public himself, he probably thinks other men disposed to try the same trick. Away with such fellows!" It is evident that no love was lost between Thomson and his brother editor.

The first volume of Urbani's *Selection of Scots Songs, harmonised and improved, with Simple and Adapted Graces*, appeared about the end of the century. The second volume was entered at Stationers' Hall in 1794; we may therefore conjecture that the initial volume was published about 1792. The work extended finally to six folio volumes, the last volume being published in 1804. It contained upwards of 150 Scottish melodies with their associated songs. The airs were all harmonised by Urbani himself, the harmonies being filled up in notes for the right hand; and the first four volumes, in addition to the piano-forte part, had accompaniments for two violins and a viola. The number and kind of instruments was rather novel, but still more novel at that time was the extending of the harmonies, and the addition of introductory and concluding symphonies to the airs. Even in the collection of William Napier, the first volume of which was published in 1790, there were no opening or closing symphonies, and the harmony consisted merely of what was called a "figured bass" for the harpsichord. These "figured

basses" could be interpreted only by trained musicians, so that in the matter of accompaniments the amateurs of last century were left to shift for themselves as best they could. Napier's was rather an important work. The first volume contained eighty-one songs, and the airs were harmonised by four professional musicians, who together represented a somewhat varied nationality. There were Dr. Samuel Arnold and William Shield, both Englishmen; there was Thomas Carter, an Irishman; and there was F. H. Barthélémon, a Frenchman, who is described as "a singular character, and a Swedenborgian." The second volume, issued in 1792, contained one hundred airs, all harmonised by Haydn, who was presently to do so much work of the same kind for Thomson. This, it will be admitted, was coming tolerably near to a representation of the "Concert of Europe"!

Of Johnson's *Museum* as one of the collections coming under the ban of our editor, it is hardly necessary to speak, that work being so well known from the intimate connection which Burns had with it. Though the last volume did not appear until 1803, the first was issued as early as 1787, so that Thomson could easily include the work amongst the unsatisfactory collections of which he afterwards wrote. He certainly held a very low opinion of the *Museum*. He refers to it several times in his correspondence, and always in opprobrious terms. Thus in a letter dated September 7, 1821, he speaks of it as "an *omnium gatherum* in six volumes, containing a num-

ber of tawdry songs which I would be ashamed to publish." It is, he presumes, "as much a book for toppers as for piano players." It was "brought out in a miserable style and without letterpress," and yet, he is pained to add, it has "had a good sale at seven shillings per volume." Criticisms of this kind are abundant, but there is no need to dwell on the matter. The *Museum* was Thomson's most serious rival; and one reading between the lines can easily see that he was chagrined at having to share with Johnson the honour of having Burns as a contributor. He did not appear to realise that in condemning the *Museum* he was to some extent condemning Burns, who, as everybody knows, was the practical editor of the earlier volumes of the collection. At the same time it is perfectly true that the *Museum* did leave a good deal to be desired, alike as to the purity and taste of its poetical contents, the quality of its musical equipments, and the general character of its get-up. In these respects Thomson's collections showed an immense improvement.<sup>1</sup>

It was in the year 1792 that Thomson took the first practical steps towards the publication of a collection of national song. At the outset he

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<sup>1</sup> Thomson slightly modified his opinion of the *Museum* when David Laing, in conjunction with Stenhouse, edited a new edition of it for Blackwood, published in 1838. Writing to Robert Chambers about the editorial work of "my old acquaintance" (Laing), he says he is "far from insensible of the merit of a work in which there is so much of Burns, though mixed with too many fragmentary bits bearing his name, which he never owned." When he learned that Blackwood had purchased Johnson's work with a view to the

was not the sole moving spirit in the enterprise, as indeed we learn from the first letter which he wrote to Burns. "For some time past," he tells the poet, "I have, with a friend or two, employed my leisure hours in collating and collecting the most favourite of our national melodies for publication." So far as I know, the identity of only one of Thomson's coadjutors has been established.<sup>1</sup> This was the Hon. Andrew Erskine, a brother of the musical Earl of Kellie, who took a leading part in the St. Cecilia concerts. Erskine was a well-known wit and versifier of the period, who had settled in Edinburgh after serving for some time in the army. He was on intimate terms with James Boswell, who too generously described him as "both a good poet and a good critic"; and in 1763 he published his correspondence with that prince of biographers. Writing to Thomson many years after this, Sir Alexander Boswell says: "I imbibed a favourable opinion of you and your work from poor Andrew Erskine, my father's early friend; and on an ardent mind these connections of idea have a wonderful effect." Erskine is described as "a silent, dull man, much beloved by his friends, and, like David Huine, extremely fond of children." Unhappily he was fond of gamb-

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new edition, Thomson offered him the sixteen designs which David Allan had made for his own collection. For these he asked 150 guineas, while for about forty unengraved designs his price was 100 guineas. Blackwood of course declined to purchase on these terms.

<sup>1</sup> He tells Burns in January 1793 that he had several conversations with William Tytler of Woodhouselee about his plan when it was in embryo, but there is nothing to show that Tytler took any practical interest in the concern.

bling as well, and it appears to have been some losses in which this propensity involved him which led in 1793 to his drowning himself in the Forth. Thomson communicated an account of him in a letter to Burns which, as we learn from Currie, he afterwards suppressed.

Thomson undoubtedly looked to Erskine and his other collaborators, whoever they were, to share the expenses of the projected publication, though, as he told Burns (January 20, 1793), the scheme was managed entirely by himself. Even before Erskine's suicide, he wrote to Burns:<sup>1</sup> "The business now rests solely on myself, the gentlemen who originally agreed to join the speculation having requested to be off. No matter; a loser I cannot be." Erskine's financial embarrassments sufficiently explain his withdrawal, but there is nothing to account for the withdrawal of the unknown partner or partners, unless we may surmise that Thomson's self-confidence led to developments in which more timid souls could not follow him. His idea when he first applied to Burns was to issue only a limited number of songs, but only four months had passed when he wrote to say that he had resolved to publish every Scottish air and song worth singing—a task of sufficient magnitude to appal men of less dogged enthusiasm than our editor.

It will be as well here to note exactly what Thomson set himself to accomplish, and the means he adopted to attain his end. Briefly, then, he

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<sup>1</sup> July 1, 1793. Erskine's suicide took place in September.



aimed at forming and publishing an eclectic collection of characteristically Scottish tunes,<sup>1</sup> with the words to which they were traditionally sung, if these were good and "proper"; with other words, specially written, if there was anything in the originals which offended his taste. The tunes, as he found them in existing collections, were not always correct or beautiful; the words were too often tawdry and indecent. To secure perfection in the former, he carefully collated existing versions, and noted down the airs as he heard them sung by "people of taste," relying—not always with satisfactory result—on his own judgment to detect the pure form of an air from the corrupt. For the words he could not do better than apply to Burns, who had already gained considerable experience of such work in connection with Johnson's *Museum*; but wishing to provide a number of the airs with an alternative set of English words for the use of Southrons, he applied for these to various English writers, the first of whom was the once famed "Peter Pindar." He was careful to explain to Burns (October 13, 1792) that he would never dream of ousting good Scotch words for any English words whatever, but he added, sensibly enough, that "it would be the very bigotry of literary patriotism to reject such because the authors were born south of the Tweed."

Thomson's plan had, however, a peculiarity—a

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<sup>1</sup> The scheme was soon enlarged, at the suggestion of Burns, to include Irish airs, of which, as well as of Welsh airs, Thomson made separate collections.

peculiarity which promised, indeed, to raise his publications in merit far above earlier collections, but which made his task, as later pages will show, one of special difficulty. His musical education had been sufficiently thorough to disenchant him with the almost uniform bareness with which the airs had hitherto been presented, and so, to fit them for concert use and for the favourable consideration of the "sons and daughters of taste," he decided to equip them with accompaniments and symphonies, the latter being independent passages for instruments, to precede and follow the airs proper. There was, as he believed, no one in the Scottish capital to whom he could entrust the composition of these appanages, and London itself was equally destitute of talent. The only resource, therefore, seemed to be to seek the aid of foreign composers, and thus it came about that Pleyel, Kozeluch, Haydn, and Beethoven, were each applied to in turn on behalf of the Edinburgh enterprise.

The results of these applications will be discussed later on; meanwhile it may be pointed out that there was obviously considerable risk in this enlistment of Continental aid. At best, distinguished composers are apt to look askance at the artless melodies of the people; and these foreigners were under the special disadvantage of having no first-hand acquaintance with the characteristics of Scottish music. Moreover, in the majority of cases they were not supplied with the words belonging to the airs sent them, and thus they had to spin, out of their inner consciousness of the spirit of

the airs, accompaniments which should be elegant, pleasing, not too difficult, and not unsuited to the words which Mr. George Thomson in Edinburgh might afterwards connect with them. It is not surprising that a great part of Thomson's correspondence with the celebrated composers was marked on his part by complaints and requests for alterations; on their part, by remonstrances, refusals, and demands for more money; and on both parts, by irritation, heart-burning, and even at length downright despair.

Further, even when the accompaniments and symphonies were thoroughly to Thomson's liking, there remained the difficulty of fitting words to the airs. There was difficulty even with Burns, though in his case the new verses were in many instances modelled closely on the old ones, which for decency's sake the editor had discarded. When, however, he came to apply to Scott, Hogg, Byron, Campbell, and the rest, as we shall see he did apply, the difficulty often became insuperable. Some of the poets confessed that they knew nothing about music, and had to fix upon their metres by the mechanical process of counting the notes. All of them soon or late showed, either in plain words or by innuendo, that they felt the irksomeness of the task. It was making the Muse walk the tight-rope; it was hobbling Pegasus in a circumscribed and by no means flowery field. A perusal of the voluminous correspondence between Thomson and his poets and composers gives one indeed a vast admiration for the unquenchable enthusiasm with which the editor pursued the uneven tenor of his



way. It gives one also a new belief in the fundamental kindliness of human nature in general and the much-aspersed artistry in particular.

With this general statement we may leave all details to be filled in from the sections devoted to Thomson's several correspondents. From the date of his first letter to Burns, for upwards of forty years, Thomson's life is practically the history of his work as editor. That *was* his life; all else was but a shadow of it. In the course of his search for songs and song-writers, as also in the ordinary course of his official duties, he entered into relations of various degrees of intimacy with people of importance in their day, and otherwise. Of these all that is necessary to be said will be said in the following pages.

In 1802, the year of the publication of his third volume, Thomson, as we learn afterwards from his correspondence, was engaged in editing and superintending the publication of the poems of Mrs. Grant of Laggan, issued in 1803. I say as we learn afterwards, for it is not until the year 1844, when Mrs. Grant's *Memoir and Correspondence* was published by her son, Mr. J. P. Grant, an Edinburgh lawyer, that we discover the part which Thomson really took in promoting the lady's literary and financial interests at this time. The matter presents some curious features. In Thomson's first extant letter to Mrs. Grant, dated December 22, 1803, he enters into certain particulars regarding some copies of her book which have not been paid for by subscribers in London, and encloses £19, 5s.

a sum received by him on her account from his agents there. This is indication clear enough of his taking a leading hand in the transactions. But in her statement, in the autobiographical part of the *Memoir*, of the circumstances which led to the publication of her poems, Mrs. Grant totally ignores the good offices of Thomson. The passage had better be quoted ; it is as follows :

Before I had ever heard of the project for my advantage—indeed before the materials were collected—proposals were dispersed all over Scotland for publishing a volume of my poems. To these proposals a specimen was annexed in what my friends in Edinburgh considered my best manner. . . . My personal friends were not only zealous themselves, but procured new friends for me, who afterwards showed the warmest interest in my welfare. Being much attached to my humble neighbours, I had at one time written, as part of a letter, a page or two of poetical regret at the hard necessity which forced so many to emigrate. The friends who had preserved this effusion sent it home, and advised me to enlarge and complete the sketch. I did so ; and thus was finished “The Highlanders,” the principal poem in the published collection ; the rest I did not see again till I saw them in print. Of the living I must not speak ; but in gratitude to the departed I must mention the unwearied exertions on this occasion of Robert Arbuthnot, Esq., the father of the present Sir William, and the late Sir William Forbes, neither of whom were personally known to me. Three thousand names appear as subscribers to the volume of poems—a number, I am told, unequalled. Some of them I owed to esteem, but certainly the greatest number to compassion or to influence ; so that my gratitude was mingled with a sense of humiliation.

When Thomson read this passage he was naturally in some indignation at the omission of all reference to the services he had rendered entirely *ex gratia*, and he at once wrote from Brighton to Mr. J. P. Grant to supplement his mother's information. He was first introduced to Mrs. Grant, he says, by his friend Mr. Brown, whose wife became "the most cherished of her friends and correspondents." About the time of Mr. Grant's death, Mrs. Brown showed Thomson a MS. poem written by Mrs. Grant, "mentioning at the same time her being burdened with a large young family dependent on her exertions." After considering the "pleasing specimen of her poetical powers," and consulting with some of her most attached friends, Thomson "suggested the publication of her poems by subscription, of which they decidedly approved, if an editor could be found." The letter continues :

In order to get the better of any scruples which perhaps might be felt on the part of Mrs. Grant in her then distressed state of mind at Laggan, it was thought prudent, and agreed on, that we should at once issue proposals for the publication upon my undertaking the editorship, relying on Mrs. Grant's approbation when all matters should be explained to her. Accordingly, I proceeded to draw up and print proposals, adding a brief specimen of her versification, which I soon after despatched to every friend and acquaintance I had, as well as to your mother's friends and those of Mrs. Brown and of the Dunchattan family. And having of course informed your mother that we had thus committed her, she acquiesced, and in a short time sent me the MSS. that were to form the volume, which I arranged and put into the printer's hands.

When proofs were sent me from time to time, however, and I had thus to examine every line closely and critically, I found that a good deal of pruning and little alterations and retouchings were necessary in order to produce a more clear connection of the parts than the original manuscript contained, all which of course I regularly transmitted to your mother for her consideration and directions, till at length the volume was completed to her entire satisfaction. And never was man more gratified than I when all the subscription papers were returned to me, containing the largest number of names that any literary work, with the exception perhaps of Burns' Poems, ever obtained in Scotland.

This is the essential part of the story, though it is not more than a fourth part of the letter. Few people nowadays read the poems of Mrs. Grant, and it matters little who stood sponsor for them; but Thomson's reputation has suffered so much from unsupported charges that it is well to restore to him the credit which is plainly his due. His work for Mrs. Grant occupied, he tells her son, the leisure hours of a twelvemonth. The Mr. Arbuthnot whose "unwearied exertions" the lady so warmly commends, was Thomson's official superior at the Board, and Thomson declares that Arbuthnot's exertions were confined to taking charge of the subscription sheets which he gave him. It is not unlikely: did not Vernon Whitford, in *The Egoist*, write those striking letters which appeared in the newspapers above the name of Sir Wiloughby Patterne? "Methinks," adds Thomson plaintively, "methinks my name might not unworthily have stood in the same page of the memoir

with his." The whirligig of time has brought in its revenges : Thomson is in the firmament with Burns ; Arbuthnot and Mrs. Grant are together in the limbo of the forgotten dead.

Thomson corresponded with Mrs. Grant for many years, and several references to her occur in his letters to others. In August 1805 he describes her to Mrs. Hunter as "extremely interesting and ingenious," and says she "possesses uncommon powers of conversation." In 1807 he writes to Lady Cunliffe (with whom, as Miss Kinloch of Gilmerton, he had been associated at the concerts in Niddry's Wynd) : "I am happy to find that the 'Letters' of my mountain friend have met with so many warm admirers in the South. The first edition is sold off, and Mrs. Grant is preparing the second, which is to have the names instead of the initial letters." Writing to Mrs. Hunter in 1808, he says he has just had a note from Mrs. Grant telling him that the first edition, 1000 copies, of her *Memoirs of an American Lady* is already sold. "It is to the liberal-minded inhabitants of the South that she is obliged. The supercilious and fastidious Scottish critics and literati have scarcely yet deigned to read or notice her productions. They have for some time talked almost of nothing but the poems of Mr Walter Scott. How long they will continue to be talked about I know not." The last sentence reads like a covert sneer at the literary and fastidious folk who found so much to talk about in Scott's poetry. This is not to say that Thomson alone, of all the world, refused it his admiration : we shall see



by-and-by that he made profession to the contrary; it may be merely a common-sense protest against allowing the new poet's merits to eclipse all others. Or it may be that Thomson, with unusual critical foresight, perceived that the general praise was rating Scott too high, in which case he has been justified by posterity. What became of all Mrs. Grant's letters to Thomson—there must have been a large number—it is impossible to say. In the letter to J. P. Grant already quoted, Thomson, rather petulantly, asks him to "put up the letters of your mother to me which I gave you," and "return them to the care of Mr. Hogarth at the office of the *John Bull*." Perhaps the request was never attended to.

Thomson, as a man of business-like habits, had always kept drafts of his letters relating to the collection of songs, but it was not until 1803 that he began to copy them into the large leather-bound folios which have been put into my hands. The earlier letters in the initial volume are concerned with the collection of Welsh airs, and we hear of little else for two or three years. At first he depended for his material largely on the help of correspondents in Wales, but finding that implicit reliance could not be placed on them, he made, in 1806, a tour of the Principality himself, taking with him his brother David, "to draw the most striking scenes in that romantic country."<sup>1</sup> He carried with him introductions to

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<sup>1</sup> The Welsh collection contains engravings of two paintings of his—Llangollen Vale and Conway Castle.

such "amateurs and antiquaries" as were likely to be of service to him; but many of his airs were taken down by himself from the singing or playing of the native harpers, of whom, as a storehouse of national melody, he entertained a very exalted opinion. So highly indeed did he think of these harpers, that he conceived the idea of importing one to Edinburgh. In 1807 he tells Lady Cunliffe that he has suggested to the managers of the local Blind Asylum the advisability of having "a good blind harper come down here for a winter or a year to teach the Welsh harp in the Asylum." He adds that "there are no harpers in Scotland except Elouis, who teaches the pedal-harp in Edinburgh"; and a good player, from the novelty of the Welsh harp, would, he is sure, "pick up a deal of money by playing to parties throughout the winter." Whether the suggestion was ever carried out it is not worth while to inquire.

In 1807 Thomson had a curious experience which led to the only piece of authorship—apart from his editorial work—associated with his name. In this year he published, under the *nom de guerre* of "Civis," a "Statement and Review of a recent decision of the Judge of Police in Edinburgh, authorising his officers to make domiciliary visits in private to stop dancing." The circumstances which led to the penning of this "Statement" (an octavo pamphlet of fourteen pages, well "leaded," and in rather large type) were sufficiently amusing, though certainly not to Thomson. From the pamphlet itself we learn that the Thomson children

had "asked a party of their dancing school companions to drink tea and have a dance." An old bachelor named Balvaird, who lived below,<sup>1</sup> complained of the noise, and sent his maid to ask that it be stopped. The girl lost her temper, and so far forgot herself as to say that the Thomson dwelling was no better than a "bawdy house"! Meanwhile, the dancing went on, and later in the evening two police officers, at the instigation of Balvaird, entered Thomson's house and insisted that the dancing should be discontinued. "This," says Thomson, "I positively refused, and after a good many words, Murray [the police sergeant] told me in the rudest manner that if it was continued after TEN he would return with a party and carry me and my friends to the watch-house. . . . I had told the young people before they began that they were to stop at half-past ten, and they did so, as I can also prove, though I presume that they might have continued till twelve, without transgressing the law of the land."

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<sup>1</sup> Thomson's house at this time was in Baxter Place. In the matter of residences he believed with Cowper that "variety's the very spice of life." My friend Mr. John Glen has been before me in hunting out his various abodes from old advertisements and directories. Here is Mr. Glen's list: Blair Street (1793-96); York Place (1801-1804); Duke Street (1804-1805); Baxter Place (1805-1808); 3 Royal Exchange (1813-19); 140 Princes Street (1824-28); 42 York Place (1828-31); Baxter Place (1832-34); 73 Queen Street (1835-40); 1 Vanbrugh Place, Leith (1850-51). There are several blanks here. The first (1796-1801) and the second (1808-13) cannot be filled up; the third (1819-24) should be filled by Queen Street, as appears from Thomson's Continental letters of 1819; from 1840 to 1845 Thomson was in London and in Brighton; from 1845 to 1848 in Edinburgh, at 13 Antigua Street; and in 1848-49 in London again. I do not think this information very important, but it is perhaps well to preserve it while it exists.



Thomson very properly objected to the intrusion which had thus been made on his privacy, and soon after brought two actions against the parties concerned. The first action was taken "against his neighbour's maid-servant for disturbing the peace of, and insulting him and his family." This case was dismissed without evidence being heard, the magistrate holding that there had been no "breaking of the peace." The second case was brought against Murray, the sergeant of police, whose dismissal, it appears, had been claimed by the inspector, as demanded by Thomson. This case was also—on the 30th of April—decided against Thomson. In the British Museum copy of the "Statement" some undiscoverable "H. C." (can it be Henry, Lord Cockburn?) has written the following on the inside of the front cover :

This statement is by George Thomson, the correspondent of Burns and the editor of his songs. The Judge was a hot-headed blockhead of the name of Tait, who first rode on the rigging of his commission till he spoiled the first police system, and then had the good luck to get about £300 a year to give up his office.

H. C.

The judge's view was, it seems, that people living in a flat ought, when giving a dance, to invite their neighbours above and below. Against this very literal interpretation of a scriptural injunction Thomson rightly felt entitled to make a protest, and he made it by addressing his "Statement" to the judge. The incident shows that his

deference to Mrs. Grundy did not go the length of puritanical notions about the sinfulness of dancing.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, this was not the only time that Thomson pleaded for the dance. Many years later we find him trying to argue Robert Chambers out of a strange, but, in him, perfectly consistent antipathy to the harmless diversion. In a letter of October 1835 ("from worthy old George Thomson," Chambers has inscribed it) Thomson says:

Some time ago I sent for your excellent *Journal* a letter on the subject of recreations for the working classes, to which you stated two objections, first that you do not insert anything epistolary purporting to come from a correspondent, and next that you felt some scruple in recommending any facility for dancing to our common people, although it is known to be the primary amusement of all other people from Indus to the Pole. If you saw the happiness it produces among the peasantry and the other working classes in France and Belgium as I have seen,<sup>2</sup> and the perfect decorum

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<sup>1</sup> The following pamphlets, in addition to the 'Statement' noticed in the text, arose out of this case: (1) "Report of two cases decided in the Police Court on Thursday, 30th April [1807]," a four-page tract probably written by Thomson. (2) "Letter explanatory of a late judgment in the Court of Police, with a copy of the judgment," signed "John Balvaird." This, also a four-page tract, is dated April 22, 1807, eight days before the date of the judgment. It was therefore probably written soon after the "raid." (3) "Postscript to Mr. Thomson's 'Statement' in reply to a letter published as 'Explanatory of a late judgment in the Court of Police,'" four pages; dated 8th June 1807, and signed "G. Thomson." These tracts seem to be very rare. The only complete set known to me, and to which my attention was directed by Mr. J. D. Brown of the Clerkenwell Public Library, is among the Whitefoord-Mackenzie pamphlets in the Mitchell Library, Glasgow.

<sup>2</sup> For an account of Thomson's Continental tour, see pp. 52-61

with which it is conducted, and if you consider that many of the proprietors of spinning mills have a room for dancing in their establishments which they find conducive to the health as well<sup>1</sup> . . . of the young people, I think<sup>1</sup> . . . to wish with me that an amusement so exhilarating should not be denied to the working classes in our own country. I have drawn up and enclose a paper recommending the study of music to the working classes as a source of the purest pleasure to them. If you like it you may give it a place when it suits your convenience ; if not, you can return it to me.<sup>2</sup>

Chrysostom was of opinion that "where there is dancing the devil is present" ; Thomson clearly took a different view, though he would hardly have gone so far as Basilius, who urged the faithful to practise the dance as a preparation for the noblest enjoyment of the angels in heaven !

At this point the biographer, searching about for facts, has to confess himself fairly stranded for the time being, for the years from 1807 to 1811 are practically a blank. Thomson's whole energies outside his official duties were at this period being given to his various collections, and there is nothing whatever to tell of him apart from his labours in that direction. By the year

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<sup>1</sup> Part of letter torn away here.

<sup>2</sup> There is no article in the *Journal* answering in any way to this description until 1838. In the number for October 20 of that year there is a paper entitled "Music as a branch of education" which may be Thomson's. Another entitled "A village oratorio" (January 19, 1839), by George Hogarth, is quoted from the *White Rose of York*, "at the request of a relative of the author [obviously Thomson] who takes an interest in the diffusion of a musical taste among the people, as it might be of service in amusing and elevating the people."

1811 he had begun to feel the necessity of getting rid of some of his properties. He had not "the command of money"; and the large sums which he had laid out upon his various works pinched him so much that he now resolved to "sell the property of one or both of my Welsh volumes merely for what they cost me." This, he remarks, is "truly mortifying, but to go a-borrowing is to me still more so, and of two evils I prefer the least." It is well to mention this circumstance here because of the light it throws on the question of his pecuniary relations with Burns, to be afterwards discussed. His income being what it was, it is not surprising to find him confessing that from the very first he was "exceedingly in want of money"; and although he was able in his old age to invest over £1300 in the Caledonian Railway and to purchase house property, there is not the least doubt that the costs of his various collections were for many years a very harassing drain upon his resources.

Unfortunately for himself he failed to effect any sale in 1811, and in 1814, by which time the first volume of the Irish collection had been published, he again opens negotiations in various quarters. Writing on the 14th of June to Preston, the London music-seller who acted as his agent in England, he says:

The money which I have expended upon my Welsh and Irish works has brought me into difficulties that bear heavily upon me. I have bills to the extent of nearly £400 which must necessarily be paid by the beginning of August, and open accounts to an equal

extent that I must pay in less than six months, and I have no other funds but my musical works out of which the payments can be made. It becomes absolutely necessary, therefore, that I should endeavour to dispose of what will relieve me.

Thomson must, indeed, have been in sore pecuniary straits about this time. At the date of the above letter he offers to sell the first and second Welsh volumes for £300, and this offer being declined he, on the 2nd of July, proposes to throw in the first Irish volume in addition for the same sum, "so urgent is my need of money." But he had to bring his wares unsold from the market: great as their merits were, not even an offer was made for them. We have no means of knowing how he met his pressing bills; but he must have found some way of tiding over the immediate difficulty, for we hear of no further serious efforts to get rid of the collections until nearly the end of his life, when there was certainly not the same necessity.

While he was engaged in these fruitless negotiations, the question of erecting a memorial to Burns at Dumfries was being agitated. Though his circumstances were, according to his own statement, so embarrassed, Thomson was able to subscribe five guineas to the memorial fund. He seems to have considered that his subscription, if not his former connection with the poet, entitled him to a voice in the arrangements, for in sending the money to John Syme of Ryedale on May 10, 1814, he writes as follows:



I cannot help feeling some anxiety that a design should be obtained worthy of the illustrious dead, and honourable to those who take charge of it. This will depend entirely on the artist to whom you apply ; and it is of the utmost importance therefore to fix upon one who is decidedly eminent for invention, knowledge, and classical taste, and to be guided entirely by him. For if gentlemen get various designs and then exercise their own judgment upon them, the chance of their choosing the worst is much greater than that they would choose the best : for this obvious reason, that there is no art or science in which our countrymen are so utterly ignorant as that of architecture or sculpture. . . . Even those who live by the profession of architecture in Scotland are notoriously uneducated and ignorant, and since the recent death of the truly ingenious Mr. Stark,<sup>1</sup> I don't know one of our countrymen who deserves the name of an architect. If there are any whose fame has not reached Edinburgh, I ask their pardon.

The gentleman to whom I would strongly recommend you to apply for a design is Mr. Smirke, R.A., London, an eminent painter, well known to every amateur of the fine arts, or to his son the architect in London, well known for his design for Covent Garden Theatre, the front of which is worthy to have stood in Athens. . . . I had a conversation soon after the lamented death of Burns with Mr. Smirke, R.A., upon the very subject of a monument to the poet. Upon that occasion he expressed the highest admiration of his genius and writings, said he would be happy to furnish a design, and I understood him to say that profit would be the last thing he should

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<sup>1</sup> The "truly ingenious Mr. Stark"—William, not Robert, as Dr. Rogers has it—had married Thomson's eldest daughter, Catherine, in 1805. Scott, in a letter of the same year to the Mausoleum Committee, rather supports Thomson's opinion. He says: "We have to regret the loss of Mr. Stark, the only architect in Scotland, as I greatly fear, who could have given a plan of simplicity and dignity corresponding to the genius of the author." Stark died in 1813.



have in view. And I remember well he expressed it to be his conviction that if any respectable character upon "Change" in London would take charge of a subscription paper for erecting a monument to Burns, and set about it in earnest, he would get many hundred pounds in two or three days. What would you think of writing to Sir James Shaw or any other warm-hearted Scotsman on this subject who has influence among those most liberal of all men, the London merchants?

This letter is interesting in several ways. It indicates that Thomson had devoted some attention to artistic matters, as indeed was to be expected of one holding his position; and that he at least was not conscious of any arrogance in writing as one who spoke with authority. It further shows that he had not lived nearly three-score years without shrewd observation of the eccentricities of committees. Finally, it gives evidence of that cosmopolitan width of sympathy which saved him from the "bigotry of patriotism" in matters of music, literature, art, and commerce. His advice unfortunately was not accepted: instead of Smirke, the committee employed Hunt, the outcome of whose design, together with the trumpery Turnerelli sculptures,<sup>1</sup> was first exposed to the public in September 1815. What Thomson thought of the whole thing is not recorded. He has plenty to say to correspondents about the absurdity of his countrymen going to Italy for

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<sup>1</sup> "What a sorry piece of sculpture is Burns' monument in Dumfries churchyard! Monstrous in conception and clumsy in execution, it is a disgrace to the memory of the poet."—*Wordsworth to Allan Cunningham*.

their daughters' music; no doubt he felt equally indignant that they should go to Italy for their sculptors, more especially when he learned that Turnerelli's model of a plough, "not being considered anything like the ploughs used in Scotland," had to be superseded by a model obtained in Edinburgh. But after all, had he not himself erred in a similar direction when he went abroad for his accompaniments?

The death in 1815 of his brother David in London affected Thomson greatly. They were warmly attached to each other, and had a community of tastes and interests, which drew them very closely together. Thomson describes the brother as "a landscape painter, a tolerable poet, and a very fine musician"—a young man "who would have been an honour to his family had his life been prolonged." Joanna Baillie, writing soon after his death, says: "We have truly sympathised with you in the loss of a brother so justly endeared to you by his worth and his various talents. I wish we had been better entitled to your thanks for kindness shown to him. He was fitted to be a very pleasing and valuable member of any society, and we have now to regret that we saw him so seldom." One or two of David's letters are extant, from which it would be easy to make a number of interesting extracts if space could be found for them. In 1813 he remarks that he is so bent on going on with his artistic studies in London that nothing would tempt him to leave the city except a visit to the Continent. Next year,

speaking of his devotion to the brush, he says: "I scarcely know why one should take so much trouble about it except for the pleasure it affords. There is only one landscape painter in London who may be said to have made anything by the art. I mean Turner, and he has made very little lately by all accounts." He contributed various songs to his brother's collections, but he tells how he longs to spend his little leisure in "writing something of greater length. I think," he adds, "if I once fixed on a *good subject* I could much more easily and in less time finish a poem of some extent than I could write on so many different subjects." Another scheme is referred to in a letter of 1813:

There is an idea come into my head of a work which I think will be a fortune to whoever does it first—that is to say if it is done well. I mean a complete edition of the Scottish poets. Allan's etchings might be admirably applied to such a work, together with views of the most classical spots to which the poets refer. Depend upon it, this will be done as soon as the copyright of Burns expires.

He had a keen interest in music, and was at one time favourably known by a collection of Mozart's songs, duets, &c. ("a most difficult undertaking," he calls it), to which he had set verses of his own. Another work upon which he spent much time was a collection of "The Melodies of different nations." He published with Clementi, whom he had heard on one occasion in the company of Madame de Staël, and whose playing he describes as "so rich

and cantabile that he seems to fill up everything and to make it *sing* at the same time." After his death some difficulty arose with the Clementi firm about the payment of the share which would have accrued to him from his works. "They have done nothing without threats," writes his brother William, who had taken up the matter. "It is of no use therefore to talk of conciliatory letters to such people. Their character on this point is well known in London. Even David told me he was aware of it." But it is time to return to our main theme.

In this same year—that is to say in 1815—Thomson was very much engaged on the arrangements for the first Edinburgh musical festival, which filled the week between October 30 and November 5. According to the *Scots Magazine* the celebration created such excitement that "for many miles round in all directions there was not a post-horse to be had on any roads, and before the festival began, the hotels, inns, and lodging-houses were so full that, unless in private houses, there was absolutely not room for another individual." George Thomson was one of the directors, and his son-in-law, George Hogarth, one of the secretaries of this phenomenal festival, and these two enthusiasts are undoubtedly entitled to no small credit for the success which attended the affair.

After this there is another blank in the Thomson biography. The letter-books give no indications of any interests in life apart from the collections of national melody, and an appeal to the available

sources of contemporary information is as barren of result as if such an individual as George Thomson had no existence. In the summer of 1819 he spent his annual holiday on the Continent, being then in somewhat indifferent health. His account of the tour is contained in eight long letters to his wife, who remained at home for the removal of the household to Queen Street. The letters are not entrancing to read, for Thomson, though shrewd and observant, was also stolid and unimaginative; but as they may help us in trying to form an estimate of the writer, it will be well to give them some attention.

The first letter is dated from Portsmouth, where Thomson has landed after "a most agreeable voyage." One of the passengers on the boat was an unnamed Count, with whom he "chatted sometimes," but "as I am deficient in modest assurance, I interchanged but few words with the Countess, for I cannot bear to be thought an intruder." In the next letter, Thomson is able to tell of his first experiences on the Continent. At the hotel at Havre, the landlord of which was "a rosy-faced little man, with powdered hair and curls as stiff and round as Mr. Creech's were," he had "greatly the best" dinner he ever sat down to. At Rouen he was much interested in a certain convent, the abbess of which "allowed us to peep through a rail at all the young ladies at dinner," and then "carried us to a large old tower, the same in which the heroic enthusiast, Joan of Arc, was confined by the English." The "extensive" boulevards here set him



reflecting on the improvement it would be to plant Leith Walk with trees. He wishes, too, that "Sandy Douglas would make haste to drain and plant and beautify the ground in front of Princes Street, and let it no longer remain a reproach to us." At the theatre he saw Beaumarchais' *Marriage of Figaro*, but was "too little conversant with the language to enjoy it." He asked a member of the orchestra if they occasionally performed *Figaro* with Mozart's music: "he had never heard of it—was sure there was no such music, and would not believe my assertion to the contrary."

From Rouen the traveller went on to Paris by "diligence," behind a postillion "with powdered hair, tied and bobbing at the neck of his short jacket all the way, his legs in a pair of immense jack-boots, and armed with a tremendous whip—in short the identical La Fleur of Sterne to a tittle." His brother William, just created a major, joined him in the French capital, but soon returned home without having greatly enjoyed himself. "No quartettes to be got," says George, "and to all other objects he seems quite indifferent."<sup>1</sup> As for our hero, he completely fatigued himself day after day with sight-seeing. He found everything admirable except the streets "where there are no boulevards." These are abominable: "nothing but

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<sup>1</sup> William was apparently, like George, an amateur violinist. In one of his letters he speaks lovingly of his Stainer violin. A letter of 1828 from Naples is full of musical small-talk. He tells of hearing Lablache, the famous basso, "whose voice is heard above the fortissimo of the band."



the rough causeway, with the nasty gutter in the middle." He "cannot imagine why they do not alter the streets into the convenient form of our own, as it appears to me quite practicable." But if the streets are nasty the people are nice. At the Fête of the King on August 25th (I am now quoting from the Parisian letters without regard to order of date) he saw many thousands avail themselves of the wine bounty, and although "all had as much as they asked, I neither saw nor heard of any of the people getting drunk, nor was there any riot or disturbance during the day or night. How fearfully different would be the result of such a distribution in London or Edinburgh!" Indeed "the orderly demeanour, good manners, and submission to authority which characterise the lower orders" in France, form, he is sorry to say, "a complete contrast to those on our side of the water."

Even the frail sisterhood here are all under the eye of the never-slumbering police, and the state of their health [is] regularly attended to; the consequence of which is that one never sees such miserable wretches as disgust us on our own High Street, nor any assemblages either in the theatres or gardens such as those that disgrace the saloons of the London theatres. I am far from believing that there is any more virtue here, but there is infinitely more decorum, and a woman in liquor is never seen.

The Parisian women, however, do not seem to him to have "that winning sweetness and beauty of features which one finds in the English women, but in general their eyes are darker and express more of character and intelligence, and in manner

they appear to have greatly the advantage." For the Parisian Sunday, Thomson, being what Stevenson calls "a countryman of the Sabbath," had naturally no toleration. The churches "seem to be attended by poor old people only. Many shops open, at least for the greater part of the day ; tradesmen at work ; the theatres open, and all the gardens filled with people ; families of itinerant musicians with circles around them ; riding rings furnished with cars and hobby-horses, Punch's opera, and all sorts of buffoonery." This was really too much for one accustomed to the Sunday silence which Crabbe, speaking of Edinburgh, declared to be itself religious. Nor was the "stiff ungodly Protestant" any better pleased with the churches. He went to a service in Notre Dame, but "of all the mummary I have ever beheld, and of all the monotonous music (if music I may call it) that I ever heard 'twas the most tiresome, and instead of wondering why I found none but old women on the former Sunday at another great church, I am rather surprised that *anybody* should go to hear such an unmeaning service. Let us be thankful for rational Episcopacy or Presbyterianism, instead of this sacerdotal and empty pomp. No wonder that the people laugh at it." This it is to have had a Protestant education, to have been brought up in a land famed for its little and contentious ecclesiastical differences ! Thomson, in fact, like the majority of his countrymen at that time, was quite incapable of doing justice to any other form of religion than his own.

The Palace of the Tuileries he thought "of very fine architecture, with the exception of its high pavilion roofs, which I do not like." He greatly admired the Palais Bourbon: "our House of Commons is as inferior to it, outside and inside, as their speakers are inferior to ours." At the Hospital of Invalids he asked his conductor whether Napoleon had done anything for the institution, and was answered: "Nothing, monsieur, but added men." At the Royal Library he thought it worth noting that "an elegant young lady was writing away with all possible celerity," having no doubt expected to see only the typical "blue stocking" so engaged. At the Palace of St. Cloud the thing that impressed him most was the absence from the entire building of any instrument of music: "You know what Shakespeare says about people without music." Two days were spent in the Louvre, where he saw enough to make him wish to spend a fortnight. In short he "enjoyed the treat excessively." The colouring of Rubens, "rich as a flower-garden," specially delighted his eye. Titian, "next to Rubens, has the greatest number [of canvases], and their excellence in composition, expression, grace, nature, and breadth and beauty of colour also is indescribable. I am inclined to prefer him to them all." The works of the French artists did not excite his admiration. "With a few exceptions they appear to me too gaudy and seldom natural, and the portraits are extremely hard and stiff, not a Rubens, nor a Turner, nor a Wilkie among them all—scarcely an approach to them." He visited

Père la Chaise, and unpatriotically exclaimed, "Alas ! for the Greyfriars, the Canongate, &c." He never supposed it possible that he "could take an interest in a foreign burying-ground," but this he "really found it difficult to leave."

Music, of course, had his attention. At the Grand Opera he witnessed "the most graceful, beautiful, and astonishing dancing ever seen in the world ;" the whole spectacle was "inconceivably grand."

The orchestra has about four-score performers, conducted by the celebrated Kreutzer, who stands in the centre close to the stage, and gives the time by the up and down motion of a small baton, without a single beat or any noise whatever. Whenever he announces by his attitude and upraised arm that the overture is about to commence, the audience instantly become mute, and will not permit a whisper ; they remain in breathless expectation of the first stroke of the bow, which is electrifying, and listen to every bar of the overture with the same attention as if Catalani were singing.

At this house he heard Gluck's *Iphigénie*, "which, though not without very considerable merit, pleased me but little. The music is too continually noisy, and the singers much more ardent and impassioned than I can bear, and the grandeur of the orchestra, with its trumpets, kettle-drums, cymbals, serpents, and double basses, becomes oppressive." The Italian Opera, with an orchestra not half so large, is "worth an hundred" of the Grand Opera. He went to the Opera Comique, "where the singing was good, the

orchestra equally so, and the acting most excellent, for the truth is that a bad comic actor or actress is not to be found at one of the theatres here." On the whole, however, he has heard nothing in the way of music "which will in the least prevent my enjoyment of our own excellent performances." In view of these "excellent performances," he tells of several visits to the music shops in search of scores. Here is an interesting little extract from one of the letters. Dr. Chalmers, it may be premised, had just been proposed as a candidate for the Chair of Natural Philosophy in Edinburgh University.

I confess I am surprised that Dr. Chalmers should think of doffing his spiritual robe or of seeking a double gown, considering his lofty pretensions as a gospel minister; but I daresay he will make a good *professor* in Edinburgh as he has done in Glasgow. Is my worthy friend Dr. MacKnight a candidate? If you meet the doctor tell him that though I had not his list of musical wants, I have purchased for him at Pleyel's some of the very best operas [works] of Haydn and Beethoven, particularly the sonatas of Haydn complete, as beautifully printed as the quartettes, and containing a number of pieces that never appeared in England. 'Tis such a work as one is delighted to glower [stare] at. If he does not receive it with thankfulness, I shall be much disappointed.

But Thomson was beginning to have enough of Paris, and being alone, was feeling himself drawn nearer to the absent in Edinburgh. During his last days in the French capital he was apos-



trophising his "burning soles" in the following doggerel :

Rest ye, poor feet, on the sofa so soothing,  
Soon we'll quit Paris, how happy ye'll be ;  
Though rich are her palaces, theatres, and gardens,  
West Queen Street, I ween, is worth all in the three.

Yes, however much he has been gratified in visiting Paris, he feels no reluctance "in turning my face again towards my own happy home, to enjoy the society of my dear family and friends."

But Thomson was not yet at the end of his travels. From Paris he set out for Brussels, where he saw the usual sights and described them in the usual way. The Cathedral as a building he did not think "remarkable for beauty," but the pulpit—that same Garden-of-Eden pulpit which excited the scorn of Thackeray—"exceeds everything of the kind I have met with." Of course he went to Waterloo, but his only reflection there is that he can "now read the account of the battle over again with much interest." With Antwerp, the place above all others which he has for many years longed to see, he was "abundantly gratified." Rubens' "Descent from the Cross" in the Cathedral he preferred to every picture he had seen of "this immortal genius," and indeed to any painting he ever beheld : "much that [as] I had heard and read of it, its sublimity and pathos exceeded all expectation."

Though Rubens is often deficient in the grace of his women, yet there is such power and majesty and splendour in his pictures that he must unquestionably be placed in the same rank with Raphael, Titian, and



Correggio. A portrait of his mistress, which has remained in his family ever since it was painted, has lately, on the death of his last descendant, been purchased for between two and three thousand pounds by a Mr. Van Haveren here, who is rich enough and has taste enough to have refused £4000 for it, offered by an English gentleman the other day. I saw it with some difficulty; 'tis matchless. I do not believe at least that such a . . .<sup>1</sup> portrait is to be found in any collection.

From Antwerp he went on to Rotterdam by way of Utrecht, Amsterdam, Haarlem, and the Hague, noting as he travelled the difference in national character between the French and the Dutch: "The Laird of Dumbiedykes and Francis Jeffrey are not more dissimilar." At Haarlem he heard the remarkable organ of which Campbell has given so fantastic a description in one of his letters. "It is," says Thomson, "the finest organ that ever was built, which I heard for an hour with inexpressible pleasure. 'Tis a glorious instrument, and sorely vexed was I to leave it so soon. When the organist made use of the *Vox Humana* stop, so perfect is the imitation that I at first thought there was a fine singer in the organ gallery." At Rotterdam he went into the principal church, "where the service is just like our own, only that the psalms are accompanied by the organ. The moment the minister finishes his prayer and proceeds to preach, the ill-bred coofs put on their hats." So ends our traveller's tale. From Rotterdam he sets sail for

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<sup>1</sup> The adjective is entirely obliterated by an ink-blot, and there is no use guessing at it.

home, telling his wife before he embarks that "I have seen nothing in the slightest degree comparable to mine own romantic town, and I would not exchange it for my choice of all that I have visited."

There is a vague hint in one letter that Thomson meant to publish this journal of his tour on the Continent; and the letters themselves read as if the intention had been present in his mind when he penned them. They are for the most part as stiff and formal as if they had been written to an utter stranger instead of to the wife of his bosom. No words are wasted in exordiums or perorations. But perhaps this was Thomson's way: for all we know, his letters to his friends and relations may have been as cold and precise as his letters to his poets and musicians. In any case the Continental letters were never published. They remained in the obscurity of the family drawers, and their very existence is here for the first time made known.

In 1821 and the three following years we find a very large portion of the correspondence given up to an attempt to recover a sum of money from Natale Corri and his daughter. Corri was for many years a singing-master in Edinburgh, and Thomson, as we learn, had become security for him to the Royal Bank in a sum which, with interest, amounted at this time to £363. In 1821 he writes to the Directors of the Bank regretting that "we find it impossible to pay this debt at present or in any other way but by instalments." Corri and Thomson, it appears, divided the sum in three

bills, payable at twelve, twenty-four, and thirty-six months, but in the end Thomson had to pay the whole—or nearly the whole—amount.

Corri died soon after the bills were drawn (June 24, 1822), and his eldest daughter, Frances, who had subscribed them jointly with her father, now became the object of Thomson's anxious attention, Thomson having meantime got James Ballantyne to join him as security. In 1822 the Bank threatened to arrest Miss Corri, but Thomson good-naturedly took steps to prevent this. In a letter addressed to her at Florence in March 1824, he reminds her that she had accepted his bills for £200, "being one half of the sum which I am now paying for your late father to the Royal Bank here by instalments of £60 a year out of my very limited income." He goes on to say that the lady's father had declared that "the whole sum which I am now obliged to pay was laid out by him for your education in London, and that you had assured him in the strongest terms that you would not permit me to be a loser. You may easily conceive," he adds, "how hard it bears upon me and my family out of a salary of £300 to carry £15 every three months to the Bank."

This letter was sent under cover to Mr. Haig of Bemerside, who was then in Florence, "with an earnest request to him to endeavour to get the money from her either in whole or in part." The appeal proved unsuccessful, and the matter now entered upon a new phase. It will not be amiss to remark that Miss Corri ought certainly to have

been in a position to pay. Thomson himself told the Directors of the Bank in 1821 that "by the exertion of her great musical talents she now earns a considerable income," and in this very year, when Thomson was writing to her at Florence, a musical critic was declaring of her that "she promises in a few years to be one of the greatest ornaments of the Italian stage." Even before that, she was thought good enough to be associated with the great Catalani in a long professional tour through the Continent. But she was in Italy and Thomson was in Edinburgh, and under these circumstances debts were as difficult to recover then as they are now.

Smarting as Thomson thus was under "the payment of a much larger sum than I can afford from a small income," there was nothing left for him to do but to rank himself with the creditors of the deceased Italian. Hence it is that with the year 1825 there begins a protracted correspondence about the sale of the old Corri "Rooms," erstwhile dignified by the name of the Pantheon, and at this date known as the Caledonian Theatre. The earlier history of this building, upon the site of which the Theatre Royal now stands, is both perplexing and tedious, and I do not propose to follow it out; those who wish to do so may profitably consult Mr. Dibdin's *Annals of the Edinburgh Stage*. In 1825 the Pantheon (the correspondence retains the old name) had been "standing very little occupied, and producing a mere trifle of rent for many years," and Thomson, who had been appointed by the assignees

to look after their interests, in which, of course, his own were involved,<sup>1</sup> began to press for the immediate sale of the property.

The opening of the correspondence is not in existence, but from the first letter of Thomson (June 22, 1825) it seems that the lessee of the Theatre Royal had been offered the Pantheon for £7000, and had "not thought the offer worthy of an answer." Thomson says his "chief hope of a purchaser all along was fixed on the manager of the Theatre Royal," but Siddons "told me that it would not suit them at all": the stage was far too narrow. The agent for the property, as we gather, held out stoutly against advertising the upset price below £6000, whereas Thomson declared that it was not worth more than £5000, if it was worth so much. He had several objections to the Pantheon, with its shops and houses. It was built up on all four sides, and so could never be enlarged; it was clogged by the privilege of free admission to the shareholders; the theatrical part of the property was risky "from the great difficulty of getting it let to a decent tenant, and the uncertainty after it is let whether the rent will be paid, owing to the poverty of the class of strolling players who in general are the managers of the Pantheon"; and worst of all "there is a vile dub before it, the opposite houses in King Street and those adjoining in James' Street being occupied as brothels, and deserted by all decent tenants." The rental of the whole property, in-

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<sup>1</sup> His claim on the estate now amounted, with interest, to £400.



cluding the "theatrical part," was only £291,<sup>1</sup> and this being so, it was no surprise to Thomson when "not a soul appeared to make an offer to the agent's advertisement." What was ultimately done in the matter of a sale I have been unable to discover, but it is clear from subsequent references in his letters that Thomson got back but a very small portion of his money. The Caledonian Theatre was subsequently leased by Murray of the Theatre Royal, who then changed the name to the Adelphi, and in 1853 the building was burnt down, just when the proprietors had practically decided to reconstruct it.

Meanwhile Thomson secured relief from his pecuniary burden in a somewhat unexpected way. And this introduces to us the name of Sir David Wilkie, who is first mentioned in the correspondence in connection with the picture of "Duncan Gray," which he had executed for Thomson. It appears that Wilkie objected to Thomson's proposal to publish the engraving of this picture on small paper in his royal octavo edition of 1822, of which we have yet to speak. Wilkie offered to purchase the plate from Thomson rather than have it used in this way, and Thomson asked him to name his price. But in the meantime Thomson promised not to publish the engraving unless the demand for his folio edition should practically cease, in which case he says he *must* publish it in his octavo. This seems to have produced an angry letter from Wilkie, for on the 19th of November

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<sup>1</sup> Mr. Dibdin puts the rental at £465, but the above statement from the correspondence with the agent is decisive.



1822 Thomson addressed the artist with the remark that he "little expected such a letter as yours of the 13th," which he read "with more surprise" than he can express. He reminds Wilkie that he never agreed to any restriction in the use of the print of "Duncan Gray," and he feels perfectly entitled to use it with any edition of his songs which he may publish. He would far rather give the print to his subscribers for nothing than "sell the plate for so small a price as that you offer me. Mackintosh the print-seller told me he could sell every proof for half-a-guinea."

We hear nothing further of the matter until 1828, when Wilkie has just returned from Italy. Thomson then writes to say that "by the advantageous sale of my delightful 'Duncan Gray' (which I fondly hoped when I got it would have gladdened my eyes as long as I lived) I had the satisfaction to relieve myself from an unfortunate cautionary obligation." Over this piece of luck he is so rejoiced that he begs to present his "good friend" with a subscription copy of Holloway's engravings of Raphael's cartoons. Thus the old Corri business comes to an end, and editor and artist metaphorically embrace.

There is, however, something further to say about Thomson's connection with Wilkie, and it may as well be said here. Allan Cunningham, in his *Life of the artist* (i. 32), had stated that on Wilkie's first coming to Edinburgh he waited on Thomson as chief clerk of the Board of Trustees, in the hope of being admitted to the Board's Draw-

ing School. He brought some specimen sketches and a letter of introduction from the Earl of Leven ; but Thomson—such is Cunningham's statement—refused to admit him because his drawings were not sufficiently good ; and it required the interposition of the Earl himself to overcome the scruples of the chief clerk. When Thomson read all this he at once sent to the editor of the *Morning Chronicle* a letter which was inserted on May 10, 1843. He says :

Where the biographer picked up the account of my scruples and the necessity of the Earl's interposition to overcome them, I know not. But I flatter myself that as everything relating to the early education of a genius so distinguished is interesting, I may be allowed an opportunity of stating exactly what took place on the occasion alluded to. When Wilkie waited on me as above mentioned he delivered the Earl of Leven's letter, which, according to the best of my remembrance, stated that the bearer of it was the son of a worthy clergyman, his Lordship's neighbour in the country, who had taken a fancy to be a painter, and begged me to look at his drawings and endeavour to put him in the way of being instructed in the principles of his art at the Board's Academy or otherwise as I might think proper. In my conversation with the young man, after examining his drawings, I told him that I considered the Academy of the Board the very best school, either for artists or decorative manufacturers, that Scotland could boast of ; . . . that here he would receive sound instruction which would cost his father nothing, and that I had little doubt of getting him admitted into it. He replied that this was just what he wished, and that nothing could make him more happy ; upon which I drew up a petition to the Board for him, and having presented it along with his specimens of drawing, they accordingly admitted

him, for I myself had no power either to admit or reject him. . . . He continued four years at the Academy, giving intense application to study, and annually carrying off a prize for his drawings, though contending with several remarkably clever fellow-students. He was a favourite with Mr. Graham, the master, who told me that he felt it a pleasure to guide his studies ; while the grateful pupil repeatedly expressed to me how deeply he felt indebted to the master for his kind and valuable instructions. For the very little service which I had it in my power to render him I received and possess letters of grateful acknowledgment both from the father and son.

This letter, it may be remarked in passing, was written in Thomson's eighty-sixth year. It bears no mark of failing powers, but is expressed with as much clearness and as fixed an assurance of his accuracy as the letters of his early official life. It shows, too, that his position at the Board of Trustees was always a subordinate one, though one also of increasing influence and emolument. As for Allan Cunningham, it was perhaps hardly to be expected that he should do justice to Thomson. The two had corresponded frequently with each other at one time, and Cunningham had contributed several songs to the Thomson collections ; but Cunningham's treatment of Burns had excited the ire of Thomson, and the rather free utterances of the latter were not calculated to cement a friendship which had never been very close.

Returning now to the year 1821, we find Thomson engaged at this date upon the preparation of an octavo edition of his collections. The "state of the times," he tells us, had put it out of the power

of people to buy expensive books, and although they would not buy his ten folio volumes at a guinea a volume, he, with his usual hopefulness, felt sure they would buy six volumes at something like a fourth of that price each. Hence came the octavo edition of 1822. Some account of this edition will follow in the proper place. Meanwhile Thomson, who could brook no rivals in what he regarded as his own peculiar field, was sadly concerned about the appearance of the *Scottish Minstrel*, the first volume of which had been published in 1821.

The *Scottish Minstrel* was projected by Robert Purdie, an Edinburgh music-seller, to whom Thomson afterwards proposed to sell his own collections! It was conducted by a coterie of ladies, whose mode of dealing with the songs may be guessed from their subsequent proposal to prepare a "family edition" of Burns. Erring stanzas they "cut out or re-wrote, and as for drinking songs, they would have none of them." R. A. Smith was the musical editor of the work, and the situation was complicated by the fact that Smith was one of Thomson's correspondents and helpers. Writing to him in 1822, Thomson "cannot help regretting" that his name should be connected with a publication "so utterly tasteless." Such "wretched doggerel, so copiously distributed, such mangling of good verses, for what purpose Heaven knows, unless to please absolute fools; such interpolations without the least acknowledgment"—all this provoked the unmeasured wrath and scorn of Mr. George Thomson. In a

letter of December 1823 to Allan Cunningham he is even more severe. He says :

It mortifies me not a little to find that a paltry collection called the *Scottish Minstrel*, recently published here under the auspices of some canting old maids, in five volumes octavo,<sup>1</sup> partly copied from my folio, and partly filled with the most vulgar rants ever chanted by the lowest of the rabble, is selling better than my collection ! It is ushered into notice by a prudish preface, in which a protest is entered against the songs of Burns, many of which, the writer says, have been purposely omitted ! One might think this sufficient to damn the book ; but the sisterhood go a great deal further, and without mercy have castrated all the songs ancient and modern in which the dangerous word "kiss" occurs, and have cut and carved in the most curious fashion all such couplets or verses as contain sentiments of tenderness or endearment, changing what is natural and beautiful into stiff and wretched doggerel. . . . Is not this unpardonable impudence and folly, and a fit subject of reprobation for those connected with the press as guardians of the literary reputation of those who have gone down to the narrow house ?

A year later he breaks out on the same subject to Sir Adam Ferguson, who had apparently suggested his taking something from the rival publication. "Heaven forfend," he exclaims, "that it should be thought that I could borrow anything from such a miserable farrago !" The editor must be "a silly, tasteless, canting old Seceder" ; it is impossible to "conceive who else could so merci-

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<sup>1</sup> The *Minstrel* is in six vols., but only five had been published at this date.



lessly mangle our harmless and beautiful amatory ballads."

It is very rarely that Thomson shows so much of the natural man as he does in the letters just quoted. A discount must be taken from his denunciation for his admission that the *Minstrel* was selling better than his own cherished works—a fact which was nevertheless an offence rather to his sense of the fitness of things than to his commercial ambition. But it ought not to have surprised him. Time after time, as subsequent pages will show, he took occasion to reprobate the general lack of musical culture in his day. The *Minstrel* succeeded *because* of those very defects which Thomson could not condemn too strongly: these "lean and flashy songs" were just as popular as those others in Milton's time, and Thomson's censure was just as unlikely to alter things as Milton's before him. Moreover, it was open to cavillers to retort that Thomson was at the risky game of throwing stones in a glass house. Had *he* never cut and carved the old songs, for much the same reason as the canting old maids? Had *he* not sought to improve even "my own Burns"? It was his constant boast that a man might put his volumes without fear "into the hands of a sister, a daughter, or any modest girl of his acquaintance." Was *that* achieved without adopting some of the methods of the silly old Seceders? There is this much to be said for Thomson, however, that *his* alterations were in the main made with the knowledge and consent of the original writers, or, at his suggestion, by writers



of higher eminence and skill. Burns might, like Molière, have remarked, *Je prends mon bien où je le trouve*; and, like him—like Shakespeare and Burton and Sterne—have justified his thefts by the use he put them to. Burns altered songs for Thomson; and Thomson could at least claim, with fair chance of absolution, that he never played the wanton in his editing.

In 1822 Thomson was again posthumously brought into connection with Burns.<sup>1</sup> The birthday of the bard was in those days celebrated triennially, and for the meeting due to be held in 1822 Thomson had been deputed to secure a chairman. Nine years before, when the same duty had fallen to him, he had ineffectually tried to entice Walter Scott to the chair. He had failed a second time, as we learn from a letter of Sir Alexander Boswell; but (such was his irrepressible hopefulness) he now made another effort to fix Scott, urging him the more strenuously perhaps because he was now a baronet, and thus more likely to lend lustre to the proceedings. Writing to James Ballantyne on January 2 (1822), he says:

I have long set down Sir Walter as the fittest and best chairman that Scotland can furnish for such a celebration. He is just the man that would be polled by universal suffrage whether he likes it or not. I spoke to him about it, but did not obtain his promise: he pled his great dislike of public meetings, his unfitness, and so

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<sup>1</sup> In January of this year he was elected an honorary member of the Dumfries Burns Club, along with Scott, Campbell, Professor Tennant, Allan Cunningham, and others.

forth. In the dislike I sincerely sympathise with him, for I hate them ; but there are occasions on which we must act contrary to our inclinations, and the world will naturally think that Sir Walter should do for the memory of Burns what Burns would certainly have done for that of Sir Walter had they changed places. The plea of unfitness cannot be listened to by any creature frae Maiden-kirk to John o' Groat's. Five hundred reasons might be urged for his taking the chair, but I cannot think of one against it. Such being the case, I earnestly wish that you would talk to the worthy baronet on the subject and bring me his consent. Then I should be very glad if he will also nominate any good Whig of his acquaintance as a croupier. I would upon this endeavour to get a list of respectable stewards from both sides of politics, such as are *likely to be agreeable to each other*—alas ! no easy matter in these times.

The “worthy baronet,” however, declined to yield to the blandishments of Ballantyne ; and on the 19th we find Thomson writing, at Scott's suggestion, to the Hon. William Maule, M.P., of Panmure, who had also refused the honour on a previous occasion.

Once more the years pass on without recorded incident in the life story. The letter-books are appealed to in vain ; nothing is to be learnt from them but the old tale of requests for songs, of the unparalleled merits of the Thomson collections, of the foolishness of a fickle public which persistently refused to pick up the pearls that were placed before them. With the year 1828 we enter upon an extensive correspondence regarding the Edinburgh statue of Burns. The marble statue of the poet begun by Flaxman had just been finished by Den-

man, his brother-in-law and pupil; and a surplus of over £1000 remained. Thomson was a member of the committee. He took a great interest in the matter, and the question of applying the surplus engaged his special attention. On the 10th of March 1828 he writes on the subject to Sir Charles Forbes, who had asked him to give his opinion as to the best means of expending the money. Sir Charles himself suggested a statue for Westminster Abbey. Thomson "most heartily" concurred, the more especially "as we know that such was the wish of your excellent and respectable friend, Mr. Forbes Mitchell, with whom the subscription originated." But the statue must not be a mere copy of Flaxman's: "that would never do." It must be "an original design by an accomplished sculptor," and the "accomplished sculptor" has been found, if the committee will only consent to his employment. Thomson then proceeds to advocate the claims of Samuel Joseph, who had settled in Edinburgh five years before this, and who is well known by his statue of William Wilberforce in Westminster Abbey.

He has lately modelled a most spirited head and fine likeness of Burns from the best existing painting of him, and has attired the brow with much taste from the beautiful lines which the poet put into the mouth of the genius of Caledonia in "The Vision." I carried to Joseph's studio two old and intimate friends of Burns, one of them Beugo, . . . and both expressed their warmest admiration and surprise at the felicity of the likeness, and the energy and fine character which the sculptor has infused into the countenance. . . . No artist living but

Sir Thomas Lawrence or Chantrey or Joseph could produce such a striking portrait, I am convinced. . . . I have sounded Joseph on the subject of the statue, in case you should agree with me on the propriety of putting it into his hands, and have the satisfaction to find that he would undertake it, the size of life, for £1000; and that for whatever additional surplus there may be he would give a copy of the head in marble to decorate the interior of a temple which has been erected to the memory of the poet close to the scene of "Tam O'Shanter."

Of course no commission was found for Thomson's nominee to execute. In the meantime Thomson had arranged with "the Commissioners of the College buildings" in Edinburgh to have the Flaxman statue placed in the University Library. "It is," said he to Denman, "the very best situation for it in Edinburgh, and I am happy that we have got it." The arrangement nevertheless fell through at this time, although it was carried out temporarily later on. The Library was in the hands of the painters when the agreement to place the statue in the apartment was arrived at, and the statue remained in London pending the clearing of the room for its reception. Before this process was completed, however, there had arisen in the minds of the London committee some doubts as to the advisability of placing the statue in the Library at all. We hear first about these misgivings in a letter of Thomson to Sir Charles Forbes dated November 1830. Thomson has "pondered and reflected" on the question "with the utmost attention to all the lights in

which it is necessary to view it," and has come to a definite conclusion upon these several points: First, it is not to be thought of for a moment that a marble statue can be placed in an open "temple" in Scotland. It would be at the risk of the climate, of mischievous boys and of drunken blackguards, and "we might lose our £1400 in the course of a night." The statue of Hygeia in the open temple over St. Bernard's mineral well is a warning, with its one arm and its chipped face and figure. If the statue is to be enshrined in a temple at all, it must be a close one. That being decided, there follows the important consideration of the situation. The terrace of the Princes Street Gardens would be suitable, but it would cost about £200 to "pile the foundation," and there is besides some doubt as to certain proprietors in Princes Street giving their consent. The gates of the Gardens, too, are always locked, and can only be opened by those who purchase keys at three guineas each annually.<sup>1</sup>

We are therefore obliged to turn our eyes to the Calton Hill. Our architect and the artists to a man decidedly recommend that Burns' Temple should be placed there and on the rock called the Miller's Knowe, where the temple would really form a conspicuous and striking object. . . . Were you to prefer the other rocky eminence on the opposite side of the road, and some hundred yards further to the east, then we would have to lay out £100 at least in erecting a dwarf parapet wall and an iron rail around the temple, both for its preservation and ornament.

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<sup>1</sup> We have improved upon these arrangements!



On the whole, however, Thomson would prefer the Miller's Knowe; and he proceeds to show how he would use the £100 which would thus be saved. He would make over the monument to the Town Council as a public trust, give them the money, and stipulate with them to pay the interest of it annually to the janitor of the High School near by, "as remuneration for keeping the key of the monument and opening the door without fee or reward." Still, he cannot help feeling that, after all, the proper place for the statue is the College Library. He would approve of the "temple," but to lock Burns into it would be to "doom the poet to perpetual imprisonment"—to set him in no proper sense before the public. With this letter to Sir William Forbes, Thomson encloses a lengthy communication from Lord Cockburn, to a great extent supporting his views. Cockburn writes:

I still remain decidedly, most decidedly, of opinion that to enclose Burns in a box and to let people get a glimpse of him by opening a locked door and then closing the lid on him is an outrage on all taste and on all the uses of such monuments. I think it will expose the city to eternal and most just ridicule. If he were made of a material which mischief alone could injure, I think I might safely engage to preserve him from it, for I am certain the tendency of our countrymen to hurt such things is exaggerated, and has hitherto been the result chiefly of their never being trusted—always excluded and never punished when wrong. Our fat friend, Hygeia, is no case: she has been a target for years, and what boy was ever even frowned at for pelting *her*?



What person in all Scotland was ever tried and punished for injuring public decoration ?

But this statue is of white marble, a substance which fades and darkens even under the blue of a Grecian sky, and must speedily be "greened" and dissolved under the Borean clouds. Therefore, I admit that it must be put under cover. But why covered by a box ? You may call it a temple ; but if it is to be a temple so small that it holds nothing but this deity and is never to be used except to get a peep of the kernel, it is a shell, use what other more dignified word you may. I think that nothing—no rules, no necessity, and no external beauty—can ever save this mode of packing the bard from contempt and laughter. Get, therefore, some worthy large place where he can be seen freely, safely, and with dignity. You will say, Where is it ? To which I answer, In the College Library, in the new Library begun for the Faculty of Advocates, in the splendid hall of the Writers to the Signet, in the Exhibition Room of the Royal Institution, in the circular dome of the Register House. . . . Disposing of the statue in this way leaves you, I understand, some hundred pounds over—a strong additional recommendation ; for, besides the statue, sacred to the rich, it enables you to erect some architectural edifice, sacred to his memory with the poor. The very carters must have some memorial of Burns. Had I the Miller's Knowe and even a marble statue, I am confident that such is the admiration in which he is held that, with due caution, even that ragamuffin race would leave him for ages unclipt. But I cannot be answerable for the gods, and so he must be covered. But wae's me on the names of those by whom he shall be covered by a tomb !

When Thomson next writes on the subject it is to the chairman of the Town Council's committee appointed to look after the matter of the monu-

ment. The committee had suggested that the Burns enthusiasts should hold themselves and their heirs and successors "responsible to keep the monument in repair." To this Thomson, in the name of *his* committee, very naturally demurs. "We shall," he says, "erect a handsome and substantial structure, and whenever the distant time comes that it may need repair, there will doubtless be many citizens of Edinburgh whose generous enthusiasm will require no prompting to do whatever is requisite to preserve the monument of Robert Burns. We trust, therefore, that the grant of the bit of ground will not be clogged with the new and unnecessary condition which I understand has been proposed, and which I really believe would render the grant nugatory." Clearly the Burns cult had not yet touched the civic rulers of the Scottish capital.

Meantime Thomson was engaged in "the most ungracious task of sturdy begging" from all and sundry for the additional funds required for the erection of the "temple." He writes to George Rennie, the civil engineer, on the suggestion of Louis Stevenson's father—"my worthy neighbour, Mr. Stevenson, the engineer," who has assured him that Rennie "could easily do something for us" among "our warm-hearted countrymen to whom fortune has been kind in London." "Do, then," he says, "speak to them, those more particularly who are unencumbered with wife and bairns, and send me their subscriptions." The subscriptions came in, until at length a sum of more than £3300 was

secured, and the foundation-stone of the "temple" was laid in 1831. Soon after, the statue was "entombed," and the matter disappears from the correspondence until 1846. On the 6th of May that year Thomson writes to tell Professor Smyth of Cambridge that the Town Council has on his application "placed the statue in the noble hall of our University Library, out of the damp and smoky atmosphere where it stood, in the vicinity of our gas-works, breweries, and foundries." But, "in an anonymous printed circular recently sent me from London, I am arraigned for the act, of which I am not at all repentant," the ground of objection being that the College Library is quite an inappropriate situation for the poet, "because he was not educated there, but was solely indebted to the force of his native genius for his high position on the Parnassian heights." This objection had, it appears, been stated when Thomson first proposed to place the statue in the Library, and he now asks Smyth to tell him, with the view of supporting his action, "whether in the halls of your University or of Oxford there are marble statues or busts of Shakespeare and Homer." All this time a correspondence on the subject was going on in the *Scotsman*, and on the 16th of May Thomson has "a few last words" in reply mainly to "the anonymous sheet, penned and printed in Edinburgh, he doubts not." With this letter the matter ends entirely so far as Thomson is concerned, Burns being left "mean-time in the most fit place we can find for him—in the noblest and most splendid hall that Edin-

burgh can boast of." The statue remained in the University Library until 1861, when it was taken to the National Gallery, to be again removed, in 1889, to the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. Among the Watson MSS. in the Gallery, it may just be added, is a letter from Flaxman to Thomson (April 14, 1823) regarding the statue, and another (December 29, 1845) from Thomson to W. F. Watson about its removal from the "temple."

It had been left to Thomson from the beginning to arrange about an inscription to be placed on the statue. For this inscription he applied first to Scott. Writing in July 1828 he says :

Of all men living who should pen this inscription, thou art the man. Were I to apply to any other, the world would write me down for an ass, there being no one who can so fully appreciate the genius of the poet, the value of his productions, or the independence of his mind. . . . I flatter myself, my good sir, from your kindred poetical feelings, and your regard for the memory of him who preceded you in the bright career you have both run for the honour of Caledonia and the delight of the world, that you will gratify the friends of Burns, *alias* the public at large, with what you think should form the inscription. . . . I asked the sculptor when he applied to me for an inscription whether it might not suffice to say :

#### BURNS

BORN JANUARY 1759

DIED JULY 1796

This, he says, may do for one of the sides of the pedestal, but should not preclude a proper inscription for the other side, for which he tells me there is a great preponderance of examples in Westminster Abbey, &c.

Thomson may by this application have saved himself from being written down an ass, and seeing the application had no other result, that may be regarded as highly satisfactory. Scott, with his usual prudence, declined to have anything to do with the inscription; the chances were that no one would succeed in pleasing the Immortal's admirers, and Scott was the last man to rush in where angels might fear to tread. His letter to Thomson on the subject is not extant, but we learn the purport of it from what Thomson says to Denman in again urging the simple name and dates of birth and death. "Sir Walter Scott, in whose extraordinary mind judgment is eminently conspicuous, has expressed that opinion to me by letter, and said he could not please himself with anything he had thought of. 'Give the name of the poet,' says he; 'who does not know the rest?'" Thomson "must therefore recommend the adoption of Sir Walter's opinion." He does not say, however, that he had applied to Thomas Campbell for an inscription after being refused by Scott. Campbell's "Ode to the Memory of Burns," written for a London meeting of the poet's admirers, had done him "immortal honour," and marked him out as the only man qualified to "pen the requisite inscription." Here, as elsewhere, we see Thomson's only really objectionable trait—his extreme facility in transferring the *ne plus ultra* of praise. But Campbell was not to be drawn any more than Scott. What he said in answer to Thomson's request we have no means of ascertaining, but at any rate no inscription came



from his pen. Nevertheless Thomson continued to entertain the idea of an inscription. Eleven years after this, in August 1839, he revives the subject in a letter to Lord Cockburn. He says :

Having consulted you as my standing counsel from the beginning, allow me to submit the enclosed inscriptions to your consideration, and to beg you to tell me whether any one of them, and which of them, might be engraved on the pedestal. Perhaps the last, being the least ambitious, is the most eligible. The more simple the better, unless we could think of something burning with high poetic fancy, and remarkable for vigour and for the utmost felicity of expression. Would you take the trouble to ask your excellent friend Lord Jeffrey's opinion? If he chose to pen an inscription it would be worthy of all acceptance. It is desirable to mention that the subscription originated at Bombay, because of the amiable person there (Mr. Forbes Mitchell) who did a great deal for it, both in India and after he came home. I should like to hear from you soon as to the inscription, as I wish it to be cut under my own eye.

It is a pity that the correspondence on the subject ends with this letter. Thomson clearly believed that he was now within reach of the practical conclusion of the matter ; but something must have occurred to prevent the carrying out of his intention, for the Flaxman statue to-day bears nothing more in the way of inscription than Scott had said it should bear. It only remains to be recorded that Thomson, according to a promise made to him by Flaxman, received a terra-cotta model of the statue, which he afterwards presented to Colonel Burns, "deeming the statuary likeness of the poet by our



most eminent sculptor a proper object to be in possession of the family." The Colonel's note acknowledging the gift is printed among the Burns family letters at the end of this volume.

Sixteen years after Thomson had poured out his vexed soul on the subject of the *Minstrel*, he was again disturbed by the appearance of another rival to his Scottish collection. This was the *Vocal Melodies of Scotland*, projected by John Thomson, a son of the musical clergyman who wrote the psalm tune known as "St. George's, Edinburgh." The two Thomson families were on the most intimate terms, often having musical evenings together at their respective homes, and it grieved our Thomson to think that he should be thus taken advantage of by "mine own familiar friend." On the 11th of October 1837, he writes to the rival editor to say how mortified he is (Thomson had a special regard for the word "mortified") that "old and esteemed friends" of his should "lend themselves to a music-seller in raising up a publication of Scottish songs with a view to rival one that cost me not only a very large sum of money but the labour and research and correspondence of many years, such as never was bestowed, nor ever will be, upon our national songs by any other." These "friends," not being able to "find a Burns for themselves," take and use "the very songs that Burns wrote for my work, which in justice and in delicacy should not be transplanted from that work into another musical publication, at least during my lifetime." If Mr. John Thomson thinks

lightly of what he has done it surprises his correspondent, who "would not have done so to you had you been in my position, if a music-seller had offered me a thousand pounds."

Of course it was ridiculous for George Thomson to claim at this time of day an exclusive right to what he calls his "beautiful Burns crop." Nevertheless, in letters to the offending editor he continues to insist not only on his moral but on his legal right to the sole use of these songs, declaring that he is prevented from enforcing his right only because of the "fearful expense" which would be involved. The "ungracious subject" drags on through several letters, but nothing is to be made of John Thomson, who takes the disconcerting view that the earlier collection has become common property. Nay, he even adds insult to injury by pleading that what he had done the *Scottish Minstrel* had done before him.<sup>1</sup> On that point George Thomson has this to say:

You remind me that the *Scottish Minstrel* did the same. True, but two blacks do not make a white. I do not think the *Scottish Minstrel*, as you do, a noble monument of skill; quite the contrary. I thought it on the whole a poor affair, not likely to interfere with the sale of my work, and took no notice of it. The worthy and clever man [Smith] who harmonised the airs for the *Minstrel*, told me that he was absolutely ashamed to have his name connected with it, because he would probably be considered the author of certain wretched

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<sup>1</sup> Curiously enough, R. A. Smith, the musical editor of the *Minstrel*, was Dr. Andrew Thomson's precentor at St. George's, Edinburgh.

mutilations and alterations upon [of] some of the old songs which the unco guid ladies perpetrated on them from sickly and false delicacy. . . . These doings, he said, would be thought his—"but they treat me kindly and pay me liberally: what can I do?" . . . What will the reader think who, not having seen the originals, forms his idea of our old Scottish songs from the trumpery in the *Minstrel*? a work which you dignify by calling it "a noble monument." I am sorry you put my work into the same sentence with it, and with Johnson's *Museum*, which I conceive will be very short-lived, containing as it does such a number of tawdry and vulgar lilts, unfit either for woman's eye or ear, and only suited to alehouse toppers over their midnight potations. It degrades my name to place it in such company.

And so, with the remark that his latest rival's conduct is "most mortifying and sickens me of the whole concern," George Thomson takes his leave of the matter by throwing at the head of his correspondent the precept: "Do ye unto all men as ye would that they should do unto you"—a precept which, so far as one can learn, Thomson himself carried into practical effect throughout his life.

The main result of the publication of the *Vocal Melodies of Scotland* was to incite Thomson to the preparation of a new edition of his own Scottish collection. Writing to Messrs Coventry & Hollier, the London music-sellers, in December, 1837, he says:

The letterpress of some of the volumes being exhausted, I am just now printing a new edition of these, with such novelties or additions as have come under

my notice since the last edition was given to the public. For I shall not sleep upon my oars while others are vainly trying to upset my trim-built wherry. Let them puff and push as they best can, I do not consider my danger to be great till they are able to convince the public of this paradox, that two or three singing-masters here or anywhere else are a match for a Haydn, a Beethoven, or a Weber. . . . Buyers must be shallow and superficial indeed who will take a paste in preference to a diamond, and at the same price too.

The new edition was ready by August 1839. It was enlarged, to quote Thomson himself, "by above twenty additional melodies and songs, and embellished by eight beautifully engraved illustrations, chiefly from the designs of Stothard, and by new vignette titles in addition to the five former large frontispieces." In a circular letter to the Edinburgh music-sellers, Thomson remarks that he does not expect ever to be repaid for the labour which the work has cost him, and fears it will be long before he gets back even the money he has recently laid out upon it. This had been his plaint from the very beginning, and, assuming it to be well founded, as there is good reason to believe it was, it says something for his enthusiasm that he should continue for so many years a work for which he could only be repaid by the praises of posterity.

It was in this year (1839) that Thomson retired from his official duties. The minutes of the Board of Manufactures contain the following testimonial to his worth, through the formal phraseology of which runs a more prominent vein of personal

esteem than such writings usually show. The minute is dated 28th June 1839:

Upon the motion of Lord Meadowbank, the Board, considering that Mr. Thomson, their first clerk, is, in consequence of the authority of the Lords of the Treasury, about to retire from the situation he has so long held in this department, *Resolve hereby* to record their full and entire approbation of his faithful, zealous, and unremitting attention to all matters to which their proceedings have been directed, as well as of the manner in which he has invariably discharged his official duties, and that the chairman should communicate to Mr. Thomson their thanks for his conduct accordingly, and the united good wishes of all the members for his health and happiness.

Shortly after his retirement Thomson went to London, with the view of being near his two sons and their families. Mrs. Thomson fell into delicate health about this time, and in September 1841 was being "attended almost daily by a physician." She died on the 13th of October while on a visit to her daughter, Mrs. Hogarth; and a few weeks later Thomson is telling a friend that his "pride and chief comfort for three-score years" has been laid to rest at Kensal Green Cemetery, "on the spot next to that which belongs to Charles Dickens, Esq." Dickens had buried his wife's sister, "poor dear Mary," here in 1837, and sadly enough Mary's brother, George, had to be laid in her grave about a fortnight after Mrs. Thomson's death. There is a touching letter (see Forster's *Life*, i. 264), in which Dickens speaks of the grief it caused him



to allow the grave to be opened. He says: "It is a great trial to me to give up Mary's grave—greater than I can possibly express. I thought of moving her to the catacombs and saying nothing about it; but then I remembered that the poor old lady [Mrs. Thomson] is buried next her at her own desire, and could not find it in my heart, directly she is laid in the earth, to take her grandchild away." It seems there was no ground to be had on the left of Mary's grave: the Thomsons' grave is on the right.

Among Thomson's letters there is one addressed in April 1842 to the managers of the cemetery, asking to be allowed to raise a monumental stone to his wife's memory in a perpendicular position, "like that of Mr. Dickens." The first stone had been laid flat, according to certain rules of the cemetery, but in this position it gave the surviving partner pain to view it, and it is therefore his "most earnest wish and prayer" that the managers will be pleased to permit him to "raise it up and assimilate it with that of our kinsman adjoining it." The permission was granted, the stone was raised to the position it now occupies; and Thomson was henceforward able to look with tranquil feelings upon the little mound of earth where his own remains were by-and-by to rest.

It was hardly to be expected that life in London would prove agreeable to the old man thus bereft of one who had for so many years been the centre and attraction of his home; and we feel no surprise when we find him, early in 1842, telling a Calcutta



correspondent that he is thinking of returning to "dear old Edinburgh" in a few months, to pass his "small remnant of life." He has transferred his London house to "a worthy friend of mine, Mr. William Webb, wine merchant in the city," who will take possession of it and part of the furniture at Lady-day. The metropolis, he has discovered, is not a fit residence for a man of his years, "owing to its immense distances, bustle, and danger from its thousand carriages, flying up and down in all the streets as if they were driven by as many furies intent only on diminishing the excess of population." To Robert Chambers he writes in November (1842):

Oh that I were near you to join in your cracks and to fiddle and accompany a ballad with Mrs. Chambers! And would I were able to wield a club as in former days, and have a game at golf with you, so much excelling the English cricket. Oh the well-remembered pleasure of driving a tee'd ba' some twa three hundred yards over the links! The exercise and refreshing sea-breeze [Chambers was at this time at St. Andrews] will add ten years to the pen-and-ink life you would have at the bottom of the Luckenbooths Close, and will cheer you on to all the sedentary tasks which you and the pen must still encounter in the mornings and evenings of your literary retreat. . . . Has not Dickens done himself great honour by his *Notes on America*? Saying nothing of the wit and playful humour with which they abound, has he not gloriously pled the cause of humanity in his eloquent exposition of the horrors of American slavery and their system of solitary imprisonment? Dickens has made a sad exposition, too, of the filthy practice of spitting in America. I should think he has demolished it, and if so he has done them an important service.

But Thomson, home-sick though he was, did not at once return to "dear old Edinburgh"; he went to Brighton, whence his letters of 1843-45 are dated. At this time he seems to have corresponded almost solely with Robert Chambers. One letter, that of May 14, 1844, gives an interesting glimpse of Mrs. John Ballantyne, "a good old friend of mine." Thomson writes:

I am not sure whether you have ever seen Mrs. Ballantyne. Her husband was, as you probably know, thoughtless and extravagant, otherwise he might have left her in easy circumstances; but except a *small* provision from one of her own friends I believe she got nothing and that she has had a hard struggle ever since John's death,<sup>1</sup> and has practised a rigid economy and much self-denial. At the time of her marriage she was one of the loveliest women that could be seen, her face singularly beautiful and her person so elegant and symmetrical that when she entered the theatre or passed along the streets of Edinburgh she attracted and riveted all eyes. Her countenance when I last saw it some half-dozen years since was still beautiful, but her fine form had become very stout and round. She wrote a sort of novel, eccentric, but not good nor successful. It were much to be wished that out of her reminiscences of the many curious and humorous scenes she must have witnessed between Sir Walter and the Ballantynes, &c., she would spin a few more yarns as good as those in the *Journal*. I thought that my suggesting the thing to her might please her, and may stimulate her to try what she can bring forth of hidden treasure.

Thomson had enclosed a letter to Mrs. Ballantyne, leaving Chambers to forward it if he desired

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<sup>1</sup> "Jocund Johnny" died in June 1821.

to have the suggested "yarns." We see the result in a couple of papers which followed from Mrs. Ballantyne's pen. She had already, in 1843, contributed two articles to the *Journal* under the title of "Rambling Reminiscences of Scott"; she now furnished (July 27, 1844) a paper on William Creech, and (September 7, 1844) some further "Rambling Reminiscences" of Scott. The latter was printed with the following note: "Two papers under this name, drawn up by Mrs. John Ballantyne, appeared in this *Journal* last year. At the request of some friends she has been induced to draw upon her memory for one more paper on the same theme." Why, it may be asked, did Thomson not draw upon his own memory for reminiscences of Scott and the other literary lions of the Edinburgh of his day? The man who had met Burns at table, who had sung to Scott and fiddled to Hogg, who was on intimate terms with Lockhart and Jeffrey, who supped with Siddons and sat to Raeburn—such a man must have had something of interest to tell. And yet how little he tells! Speaking of Scott and Jeffrey in 1844, he says: "I saw more of the poet than the critic in consequence of my intimacy with his friend James Ballantyne, at whose table,<sup>1</sup> as well as at his own, and occasionally at my own

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<sup>1</sup> Lockhart tells of one supper at Ballantyne's at which "old George Thomson, the friend of Burns," was ready with "The Moorland Wedding" ("Muirland Willie") or "Willie brewed a peck o' maut" for the benefit of the company. "Muirland Willie" was Thomson's favourite song for such occasions. Mr. George Croal, of Edinburgh, informs me that he heard him sing it when he was an octogenarian, "with great spirit and with all the humour it demands." And there are thirteen stanzas, too!

house, I had frequent intercourse with him. . . . Indescribable was the pleasure of his society; no praise can exceed both his goodness and his greatness." Even from this short reference it is possible to realise what opportunities Thomson enjoyed for playing the part of Boswell. If he had lived in these later days he would certainly have written his "Reminiscences"; as it was, he probably enjoyed himself too well to think of turning tale-bearer for the benefit of posterity.

But to return from this digression: when Thomson next writes to Chambers, in September 1844, it is to express his "grief" that "the gude town is about to sell Trinity [College] Church to be demolished for giving elbow-room to the railway terminus." He can scarce believe that Mr. Adam Black, who was Lord Provost at this time, will be brought to sanction such a proceeding. The church is "a chaste Gothic edifice of great antiquity, and I do not know any great city that possesses so little of that architecture as Edinburgh. It would be barbarous, if not sacrilegious, to pull it down, and I would fain hope that some potential voices among you will be raised to prevent it. It were infinitely better in this kirk-building time to carry out the original plan of the Trinity Church, with its tower, and make it one of the ornaments of Edinburgh, as it would be if completed." The barbarous and sacrilegious act was nevertheless committed, in spite of the most strenuous efforts of Black and others to make some kind of restoration of the church a condition of the railway

company's obtaining possession; and it was not until 1871-72, after a period of nearly twenty years' litigation, that the present Trinity College Church was erected, with the carefully numbered stones of the ancient structure. It can hardly be described as "one of the ornaments of Edinburgh," but it embodies at least the spirit of Thomson's suggestion.

If Thomson went to Brighton with the object of getting over his home-sickness, he soon found that a cure was hopeless there. Brighton, in short, pleased him as little as London. There were handsome buildings, no doubt, but nothing else to look at "except the sea without ships, which are only to be seen dimly in the far offing." There were "no meadows, gardens, plantations, shrubberies, or any rural scenery," and for these his soul yearned. In this connection, part of a letter addressed to his son William may be quoted: it will give, besides, some notion of his views on the eternal Irish question. Thomson, it will be seen, had a higher opinion of the Irish people than Shelley, who daringly described them as "of scarcely greater elevation in the scale of intellectual being than the oyster."

If I get the house I am in sublet before winter, we shall be off to good old Scotland again, where I shall be much more safe [he has just been speaking of London dangers] during the remainder of my evening of life, and can live more economically. Coals, which we get for 10s. a ton there, cost us 31s. here. A Brighton friend who has just returned from a visit to the North of Ireland quite surprised me by his account of the cheapness of provisions there: 6d. for a pair of fowls, and lamb 3d. a pound. The gentleman himself is a bright-hearted



Irishman. His countrymen in general are a merry, witty, nice, laughing people. What a million of pities they have been so cruelly governed and oppressed! Instead of wondering at their occasional outbreaks, I am amazed to see them so quiet and peaceable. The judges on the late Assize had white gloves presented to them! O'Connell seems to have wrought wonders, and Father Mathew in his way has preached to better purpose than their clergy, who—that is the Protestant part of it—are so immensely overpaid, while the Catholics are fed on crumbs, and the talented, benevolent, good-doing Father gets nothing at all at all for his labours of love, as far as I have heard. O'Connell and Father Mathew together are a matchless pair, let Tory croakers or Crokers say what they will.

Obviously, if Thomson had lived some forty or fifty years later, he would have been found on the Home Rule side. This letter shows, too, that although he was ready to laugh at the Catholics in France, he was equally ready to give them his sympathy in Ireland. But these are questions upon which it is unnecessary to dwell. It is more to our purpose to note that Thomson, returning now to Edinburgh,<sup>1</sup> had barely got settled when certain friends (he mentions specially Charles Black, Robert Chambers, and Mr. Robertson, a member of the Town Council) proposed to give him a public dinner. We hear first about the matter in a letter to William Tait, dated October 9, 1845. Thomson is “truly grateful” to his friends, but he really has “not the slightest appetite” for the proposed honour, and he earnestly

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<sup>1</sup> The first communication in his letter-book after his return is dated from 13 Antigua Street in July 1845.



pleads that they would abandon the project. He never cared for public dinners, has been quite unaccustomed to such functions, and would greatly dislike to be the object of one. Moreover, his infirmities (he calls himself eighty-six, while he was in fact eighty-eight) unfit him altogether for large parties. "I particularise my loss of teeth and my deafness only, the one making me a mumblor, and the other depriving me of the pleasure of hearing much of what passes, even at a family party. In a public meeting I could hear almost nothing that is said, and you can easily imagine how perfectly blank, or rather how stupid-like a man appears when so situated, and when words are addressed to himself." Tait seems to have called to argue the matter with Thomson, and to have left him to think it over.

The following April (1846), however, still found him of the same mind. He is really "too old for such convivial excitement," and must "absolutely decline the honour" his friends would confer upon him. But his friends were not to be put off, and the distinction thus resolutely refused took another form—the form of a testimonial. The date of the presentation was the 3rd of March 1847, just one day before Thomson completed his ninetieth year. The best account of the meeting is that given in the *Caledonian Mercury* of the following day. The gathering was held in Gibb's Royal Hotel, and Thomson's old friend, Lord Cockburn,<sup>1</sup> was in the chair. He

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<sup>1</sup> "You have ever treated me in the most friendly and condescending manner, and be assured that your many acts of kindness have not

made a long speech, the main feature of which was a vigorous protest against the manner in which Thomson's pecuniary treatment of Burns had been criticised in certain quarters. Indeed, his Lordship stated expressly that it was partly with the view of removing the evil impression thus created that the presentation was being made. As to that, we shall have something to say later on. Here the following quotation will be more in place. Speaking of the reason which prompted the presentation, Lord Cockburn said :

It would not be sufficient to account for it merely upon the ground of personal affection or our respect for Mr. Thomson individually. He has been spared—I thank God in saying it—he has been spared to live amongst us for a very long time, and during all that protracted period his life has been devoted, in one course of unchanging gentleness, to public and private duty. But it is not upon these grounds alone—it is upon no ground of personal attachment only—that this assemblage of his friends have met to do him honour. He has been engaged in some, and in particular in two vocations which entitle him to the public gratitude not of us merely but of the whole community both of Edinburgh and Scotland. He was for a very long time secretary [clerk] of a public Board, which brought him into immediate connection with all persons engaged in and with all measures intended to promote the advancement of manufactures and of the arts, and of design in art of a higher order. Though not actually in the chair of that institution, it was

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been conferred upon an ungrateful man ; for go where he may, and whether to stay or return, he will ever reflect with pride and pleasure on having been honoured with the friendship of Lord Cockburn.”—*Thomson to Cockburn, 24th August 1839.*

his mind that predominated and directed its proceedings. I may vouch from what I used to see that there was no man under that Board, or under its patronage, who did not bless the name of Mr. Thomson. In everything that related to the advancement of the useful or the elegant arts he was an instructor and guide ; and if there was a single young man who had the promise of merit united with a humble disposition, it was to Mr. Thomson he looked for countenance, and it was his house that was always ready to receive him.

The chairman after this proceeded to dilate upon Thomson's work in connection with his country's song, and in particular on his work in connection with Burns. In closing he said, rather grandiloquently, and with a lordly negligence of grammar : " There is no place, no language, no individual who does not bless not only the person who produced the words, but he who first connected them with their beautiful and appropriate sounds." His Lordship then presented Thomson with a handsome silver vase, described by the *Mercury* as " of massive appearance and beautiful design," and of " chaste and elaborate workmanship." The vase bore the following inscription :

Presented to George Thomson, Esq., by one hundred of his friends and admirers, to record their regard for him as a man, and their concurrence in the gratitude of his country for his early, continuous, and at first hazardous exertions for the improvement and diffusion of the united national music and poetry of Scotland. Edinburgh, 1846.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The *Mercury* notice has 1847, but this is an error. The inscription had evidently been cut some months before the presentation.

Thomson's reply was quiet, and devoid of any striking points. He began in the "proudest moment of my life" style usual on such occasions, and afterwards wandered into a disquisition on the history of Scottish song. He would "never get back the money" his collections had cost him, but they had brought some honour to his humble name which would in a manner make up for his loss. He ended by wishing his friends a hundred years of life, "in as good health as I at present enjoy in my eighty-sixth year." It will be seen that, even accepting his own birth-date, Thomson was steadily growing younger! The presentation vase is now in the possession of Mrs. Thomson-Sinclair. A silver salver also in her keeping bears the inscription: "The gift of friendship to George Thomson of Edinburgh, 1815." This, too, was given to him by some of his cronies in the capital. If Thomson had his detractors, he clearly had a large number of friends who thought well of him.

From the date of the presentation in 1847 onwards, very little is to be learnt about the old man who refused to feel old, except from the few letters he now wrote. In the same year he writes to Robert Chambers about the sale of his pictures. He says:

Being an annuitant and far advanced in years, I wish to convert such superfluities as I have into money for the sake of the woman-kind that are to survive me. The fine arts have been my hobby through life, and my chief associates have been artists and lovers of art and *belles*

*lettres*, from Runciman to Raeburn and Williams. . . . I have thus acquired an ardent love of pictures and drawings, which I have collected from time to time as opportunities offered and my means permitted me to obtain. And having always had the advice of counsel learned in the art of making purchases, my collection, though small, is quite select, and the subjects are beautiful—about twenty in number. If you are intending to embellish the walls of your handsome house<sup>1</sup> I should be well pleased to transfer my collection to you, or such part of it as suits your fancy, at reasonable prices, as I would rather avoid bringing them to a public sale. You might look at them any morning when the sun is in the sky, for on a cloudy day you can form no judgment of pictures. Believe me, however, that I have not the slightest wish to press a single picture upon you—far from it. I seek not any undue advantage by selling. . . . If your brother William is a collector of pictures, tell him of mine.

There is no record of any transfer being made to the walls of the handsome house; nor, on the other hand, do the artistic “superfluities” seem ever to have been converted into cash. The greater number of the Thomson pictures are, in fact, still in the possession of the family. Mrs. Thomson-Sinclair, writing to me from Dunbeath Castle, says: “This house is full of treasures. Many of the pictures have descended from George Thomson. Those by David Allan, Stothard, and Smirke were painted for Mr. Thomson to order. I have, as well, two portraits of Mr. and Mrs.

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<sup>1</sup> Mr. C. E. S. Chambers thinks that probably the house 1 Doune Terrace is here referred to.



Thomson painted by Sir Henry Raeburn. Mrs. Thomson he painted and presented to her husband; the other portrait was an order. There is also a very good portrait of Mr. David Thomson, the artist, here, as well as several pictures painted by him, which are considered very clever." It would be presumptuous for an untutored art critic to say anything of Thomson's tastes in the matter of pictures. Something may be gathered from his comments on the works of Rubens and others already quoted; for the rest I can only cite the observation of Constable's partner, Mr. A. G. Hunter, who described him as "a nominal connoisseur in painting." That remark was of course meant to be depreciatory, but surely to be even a nominal connoisseur is something in a man's favour.

Towards the close of the year 1848 Thomson went a second time to London—a bold undertaking for such a patriarch.<sup>1</sup> He had now let his house, 73 Queen Street, Edinburgh, for five years, at a rent of £56 per annum, which he is "informed by persons of skill" is lower than it ought to be. In January of next year we find him writing to Mrs. Robert Chambers to say how anxious he is to be among his friends in the North. "Dearly do I like dear Edinburgh—its Cockburns, its Jeffreys, and its Scotts; men ever to be remembered, and a' its honest men and bonnie lasses, God bless them!" In short, London was more unendurable

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<sup>1</sup> The statement of Dr. Rogers (*Book of Robert Burns*, ii. 283), in so far as it suggests that Thomson first went from Edinburgh to London in 1848, should be corrected.



than ever, and he must seek his home once more in Edinburgh. In October, accordingly, he was negotiating about the purchase of the house 1 Vanbrugh Place, Leith. Ultimately he concluded the bargain, paying £650 for the property, and returned to his "first, best country," there to await the inevitable call.

From this time on to the end, it was a noiseless passing "along the cool sequestered vale of life" for Thomson. To one of his friends<sup>1</sup> he writes telling that he is "leading a quiet existence in the bonny links of Leith, forming a lawn of some forty acres, on which I look from my windows, and within a few minutes' walk of the seaside." The company of his unmarried daughters was a great solace to him in these later days. Since her mother's death, Margaret had acted as his housekeeper. "She was devoted to her father, and never left him," says Miss Moir. In spite of his buoyant temperament, Thomson was beginning to feel the weight of the accumulating years. "I suffer from cough, and from weakness of sight not a little," he writes in March 1850. "I must lay aside my pen entirely and make one of my daughters my secretary. They read to me every evening." Unhappily there were other

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<sup>1</sup> Miss Mary Arbuthnot Moir, of 27 Hamilton Place, Edinburgh. Miss Moir is now (1897) over ninety, but is still alert and full of interesting reminiscences. Her father was intimate with Scott, and she was in the next box to Sir Walter in the Theatre Royal when "Rob Roy" was first performed. It was to Mr. Moir that Scott was referred as "the prince of the Jacobites" when he conceived the idea of the ballads. Miss Moir was a great favourite with Hogg, who was a frequent visitor at her father's house.

things to disquiet him besides his failing physical powers. Several years before this he had purchased a number of shares in the Caledonian Railway. He had paid £50 for each share, and now the shares were selling for £7. The result was that "many hundred pounds which I expected to leave for the support of my daughters when I am gone, I have too much reason to fear I shall never see again." In connection with this unfortunate business Thomson wrote a letter to the secretary of the company, which, with the exception of a long communication addressed to Robert Chambers on the old Burns theme, is the last letter he has copied into his letter-book. It is dated 25th March 1850, and although the gist of it has just been given from another source, there are obvious reasons for quoting it in full. It is as follows :

I have received your printed circular report by the Directors of the Caledonian Railway to the meeting of the proprietors to be held on the 28th of the present month, which enclosed a proxy for my signature as a proprietor, authorising certain gentlemen therein mentioned to vote in my name. And having glanced at the very complicated statements and immensity of figures contained in those papers, I feel it necessary to return the proxy enclosed unsigned, because I am totally unable to raise any more money for the railway, and quite unwilling if I had it so to apply it, having since 1845 paid £1342 for the Caledonian Railway, not for other railways to which it has been most improperly and surely illegally applied ; all which, with its interest, I had destined for the support of my children after my death, an event that cannot be

far off, as I am now in my ninetieth [ninety-second] year. Thus I have reason to lament the day I invested all the money I could command in the hands of such a company, who, not confining themselves to their advertised object, became speculators in other concerns, by which means and by unexampled prodigality of expense of management we poor shareholders, it is plain, must lose our money.

There is always a pathos about a man's last words, and these last (or all but last) written words of George Thomson are specially pathetic. They cannot fail of inspiring regret that any cloud should have darkened the old man's eventide; and the long involved sentences, so unlike his wonted lucid style, tell their own tale of enfeeblement and decay. The end he anticipated, apparently with no shrinking fear, was nearer even than probably he expected. During the winter his health sensibly declined, and he was almost entirely confined to the house. On the 18th of February (1851) he died. On the 20th the *Courant* in a short obituary notice stated that "only a few days before his death he examined with evident gratification a collection of fine old prints shown him by his friend Mr. Watson, bookseller, Princes Street." His "kindness of heart endeared him to a large circle of friends, who entertained towards him the deepest affection"; and "during even his last moments his mild and genial disposition exerted all its former sway." His remains were laid beside those of his wife in Kensal Green Cemetery, where may now be read the following inscription, written by Charles

Dickens, on a stone which stands sadly in need of restoration :

THE FAMILY GRAVE  
OF  
GEORGE THOMSON, Esq<sup>RE</sup>

*Sacred*

TO THE MEMORY OF  
KATHERINE MILLER  
FOR SIXTY YEARS THE BELOVED WIFE OF  
GEORGE THOMSON, Esq<sup>RE</sup>  
OF EDINBURGH

HER SWEETNESS OF DISPOSITION ENDEAR'D HER TO ALL  
AROUND HER : WHILE HER CONJUGAL AND MATERNAL  
AFFECTIONS, HER CHEERFUL AND HUMBLE  
PIETY, REALIS'D TO HER HUSBAND  
AND CHILDREN THE PUREST  
DOMESTIC HAPPINESS

BORN AT KELSO THE 2ND OF JULY 1764  
DIED AT BROMPTON THE 13TH DAY OF OCTOBER 1841

ALSO

GEORGE THOMSON

THE AFFECTIONATE HUSBAND OF THE ABOVE  
WHO DIED AT EDINBURGH ON THE 18TH FEBRUARY 1851  
IN HIS 94TH YEAR.

TENDERLY UNITED IN LIFE, IT WAS HIS DESIRE THAT HIS  
REMAINS SHOULD BE BROUGHT TO BE LAID BESIDE  
HIS BELOVED WIFE IN THIS LAST  
RESTING PLACE

The foregoing pages will have shown how meagre are the data for an estimate of Thomson the man, and the correspondence subsequently to be dealt with makes but slight addition to them. His letters are mainly the plain straightforward communications of a business man, who, if occasionally he does use fine words, uses them in the way of business. His letter-books are very far indeed from presenting the least feature of a *journal intime*; and if, like most men, he did share intimate communing with familiar friends, there is no record of it remaining. Of external testimony to his ways, whims, ideas, there is practically none. Even his tombstone tells no more than that he was a loving husband, as most men, on their tombstones, are. All that can be done therefore is to piece together such scraps of suggestion as his letters may contain, into what can only be a tentative "character."

Of Thomson's personal appearance we have no trustworthy means of judging, save by the portrait painted by Sir Henry Raeburn, reproduced for this volume.<sup>1</sup> The portrait, it will be seen, represents a man in the prime of life, with shapely head, in its upper part showing a noticeable likeness to Byron's; the well-cut lips, firm round chin, and slightly impending nose bespeaking—so the physiognomists would tell us—no mean resoluteness of will and tenacity of purpose; the eyes expressing a mild thoughtfulness not repugnant to

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<sup>1</sup> One or two people indeed remember him, but only as a very old man.

laughter. It is withal the face of a man shrewd, easy-going, self-reliant, ready to form and to hold an opinion of his own ; regarding the world with a steadfast countenance, and prepared to take calmly whatever of joy or sorrow, prosperity or adversity, it may have to give him.

As regards personal habits, we can glean only a hint or two. A good deal is revealed by Carlyle's single epithet of "clean brushed" ; and Thomson's handwriting ("your fine Roman hand," is Tennant's phrase) confirms one's impression of the writer as spick and span and methodical in his ways—an impression supported again by the careful and precise manner in which he has docketed and "red-taped" his correspondence. And this is the best guarantee of cheerfulness and geniality, in giving him which qualities all his friends concur. Miss Moir describes him as "charming, most hospitable, kind and amiable, sensible and friendly." Robert Chambers' daughter, Mrs. Dowie, says : "I knew him well, and often went to see him when he lived in Antigua Street. He was a most eager, active, and amiable man, very fond of us young people." Such testimonies amply support the inferences which one draws from his correspondence. One can hardly imagine him in a temper. His pen was never dipped in the "consuming fire" with which Shelley threatened to burn his critics ; and even when he had a clear case against piratical publishers who had robbed him of his property, he willingly forbore to exercise the powers which the law put in his hands. His



kindliness of disposition engaged him in thankless and unprofitable undertakings, like the publication of Mrs. Grant's poems, and the financial backing of an impecunious Italian. He threw himself with disinterested ardour into whatever projects won his sympathy, and ever tendered his advice, as in regard to the Burns statues, with a single eye to the common good. The position he held at the Board, and the relations he must have had with people of varied rank and temperament, demanded a tactful circumspection, in which he seems never to have come short. Even in arranging a Burns supper he gave himself no little trouble in selecting croupiers who would be agreeable to each other.

His freedom from the "bigotry of patriotism" has already been noted. He was not so fanatically Scotch but that he could write: "If we are to sing of battles, Waterloo is worth ten thousand Cromdales." Nay, he was unpatriotic enough to denounce the bagpipe as "a great, noisy, untuneable, monotonous instrument"; and even the Doric itself he regarded as a dialect only for menials and the vulgar. Indeed his *amor patriæ* comes out strongly only when he is in the stranger's country. On the Continent he sighs for "mine own romantic town," as Scott sighed for the heather; and when as an old man "on the way homewards," to use Browning's phrase, he finds himself far from the scene of his life's work, his heart turns with all a lover's fondness to "dear old Edinburgh," whither he hopes to return, and "die at home at last."

He had a certain amount of proper pride, more

than once speaking out frankly when he thought that he was slighted, and resenting with amusing bluffness the unlucky designation of Beethoven,<sup>1</sup> which made him a "music-seller in Edinburgh." But he was not without a gracious modesty too, a quality of which he said in a letter to Burns (almost paraphrasing Horace), "the greatest modesty is the sure attendant of the greatest merit." He disclaimed having done anything to deserve a public dinner; and when David Vedder would have ranked him with Shakespeare and Burns, he bade him for God's sake keep the fulsome stanza from the press. To Mrs. Grant he describes himself as a "poor prose man," and hopes that if the world ever knows anything of his career it will give him due credit for his humility. He has not become "vain and consequential," although he has "the first poets of the age pouring in their contributions" to his work, telling him to "take or reject or alter" according to his will and pleasure. "There's honour for you!" he exclaims, with the frank pleasure of the schoolboy.

Everybody spoke well of him, but it could not be said of him—what Sir Oliver Surface in Sheridan's play says of such well-reputed people—that "he bowed as low to knaves and fools as to the honest dignity of genius and virtue." He did in truth employ a somewhat sycophantic flattery towards the people of genius and virtue whose favours he had to ask: his minstrels were all, in the

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<sup>1</sup> See the Beethoven correspondence, page 329.

phrase of Keats, dieted with praise. But he knew his men. "We artists—how well praise agrees with us!" says Balzac; and Thomson certainly wrote as if he meant to test the truth of the saying. At any rate, his adulation was so open and ingenuous that it never offended; and all his great correspondents seem to have regarded him with unflinching respect.

Of his religious opinions we know practically nothing. There was assuredly no cant about him; he did not salute all and sundry with scraps of morality; and the careful purging of his songs was a perfectly frank concession to the frailty (shall it be said?) of the ladies. When he heard from Cunningham that Burns proposed for the three a meeting at the Bield Inn, where they would "pour out a drink offering before the Lord, and enter into a Solemn League and Covenant, never to be broken nor forgotten"—when he heard this, he did not lift his hands in horror and indite a sermon, thinking because he was virtuous there should be no more cakes and ale; he simply said: "Your bacchanalian challenge almost frightens me, for I am a miserably weak drinker." In short, we would fain believe that his religion, like the religion of Louis Stevenson's old gardener, was "neither dogmatic nor sectarian."

The main features of Thomson's character, naturally enough, come out best in connection with his life-work. One cannot too much admire the singular devotion with which he prosecuted through many years an enterprise that made demands so heavy on his time, his thought, and his purse. His en-

thusiasm amounted almost to genius. He seemed to have a sheer disdain of difficulties. When he found one road blocked, he blithely went in search of another. Nor did his enthusiasm run-amuck through his judgment. His letters are invariably calm, clear, and business-like, with scarce a spot of colour or a glint of fire; he says in plain words what he has to say, knowing well his own mind, and has done with it. When he had to criticise and find fault, as often—too often—he was obliged to do, he set about it with the same courtesy and good humour. Campbell said of him that he possessed “the uncatholic quality of candour in a high degree”; and Joanna Baillie, who of all his poetical correspondents was the least submissive to his magisterial correction, never shows one touch of personal resentment. The accusation of niggardliness in his dealings with his helpers is quite unsubstantiated. He was not lavish, but he was not mean. To his composers he offered at the outset what he considered fair prices for their work; he did not refuse to increase his terms when a request for increase seemed reasonable; but he knew the limits of his purse, and said plainly what he could or could not afford. It is impossible not to believe that, in his early days at least, he managed to pay his composers only by the severest self-denial. In regard to his poets the case was different.<sup>1</sup> With insignificant exceptions they all refused to be paid. Joanna Baillie, indeed, with a touchiness incompre-

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<sup>1</sup> For the Burns-Thomson controversy see separate section.

hensible in our sordid day of so-much per thousand words, flung back a present he sent her, forbidding him to do the like again. The others for the most part accepted the gifts he made them, and these were of no inconsiderable value. The whole truth seems to be that in money matters Thomson was careful, as he was bound to be; and we shall not be far wrong if we give him his justification in the Horatian precept: "Does a man live stingily? Let us call him a thrifty fellow."<sup>1</sup>

It is natural to ask what qualifications besides his manifest enthusiasm Thomson had for his self-imposed task. On the musical side one finds it difficult to give a definite answer. To entrust his work to composers like Haydn and Beethoven certainly seems—leaving aside the question of judgment—to argue good taste, and his letters to several of his helpers, those to Beethoven in particular, are full of denunciations of the depraved tastes of the public of his day. His expressions of commendation are, however, so general, made up so largely of vague words like "exquisite," "charming," "elegant," that it is impossible to take any just measure of his critical faculty. In regard to the literary side we are not left in much doubt. Thomson so constantly had to find fault with the work of his versifiers, and so carefully coupled his censure with suggestions, that one can form a very fair estimate of his literary skill. His general attitude is defined in a letter to Burns, dated November 1792. In this letter he says that

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<sup>1</sup> *Parcius hic vivit: frugi dicatur*, Sat. I. iii. 49.



his disposition is not to pick out faults; that his chief object is to discover and to be delighted with beauties; but that in examining critically and at leisure what perhaps was written in haste, he may happen to observe careless lines. "The wren will often see what has been overlooked by the eagle." Here he makes the gratuitous supposition that the verses sent him were written in haste; and the obvious retort to his metaphor is that what the eagle has overlooked is probably too insignificant to be of value except to the wren. In Pope's words, "not to know some trifles is a praise." Thomson's eye was all for the trifles. He had but the merest touch of instinct for the poetry of imagination as distinct from that of reason. In other words, his taste was purely academic, and everything that came before him had to be judged by mechanical rule. So true is this that Keats' words—although their original application was very different—might almost have been directly addressed to him:

Ye were dead  
To things ye knew not of,—were closely wed  
To musty laws lined out with wretched rule  
And compass vile; so that ye taught a school  
Of dolts to smooth, inlay, and clip, and fit,  
Till, like the certain wands of Jacob's wit,  
Their verses tallied.

Except that Thomson's minstrels were not dolts, this was pretty much the position. The intellectually feeble were ever in his mind's eye, and in their interests he would have dissected the rainbow itself.

In a letter to Burns (October 13, 1792) he says,

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what is true enough, that simplicity should be the prominent feature of a song. "I do not consider the song," he says, "to be the most proper vehicle for witty and brilliant conceits." Some months later he says again: "Simplicity is a most essential quality in composition, and the groundwork of beauty in all the arts." Yet Burns is obliged to tell him once that he is "inclined to sacrifice simplicity to pathos, sentiment to point." In truth his criticisms are mainly of a niggling sort, many of them being wholly without justification, and springing either from a defective ear, a deficient imagination, or an exaggerated sense of propriety. He wishes to substitute "all-telling" for "describing," which Burns properly remarked would spoil the rusticity of the stanza. Resting on the infallible authority of Johnson's dictionary, he tells Joanna Baillie that "hight" is obsolete, and suggests that "vestment" is a better word than "mantle" for a nun's dress. All these are simply prosaic, and it is not surprising that Miss Baillie retorted somewhat sharply, though not perhaps very felicitously, that a measure of obscurity is allowable in poetry.

Nor were Thomson's criticisms only prosaic. Some of them, as we shall find from the Correspondence, are so absurd as to remind one of the imbecile who provoked the mirth of Frederick the Great and his philosophers by changing Schiller's line, "All the world rests," into "Now half the world doth rest." Dr. Holmes calls him a "silly body" with reference to his suggestions for "Scots,

wha hae,"<sup>1</sup> and a "silly body" his letters too often show him to have been. Nevertheless, it would be unfair to grudge him some measure of praise. There is no doubt that he gave himself an immense amount of trouble over the "perfecting" of the various songs written for his collections; and his criticisms did in many cases produce improvements by the authors themselves. He claims to have gone over and to have critically discussed with them three-fourths of all that was sent to him, and having read every word of his correspondence I have no hesitation in saying that it bears him out in the claim. But on the whole he was not happy as a critic and an "improver"; and one can only regret that he had not taken to heart the precocious advice of Pope:

Launch not beyond your depth, but be discreet,  
And mark that point where sense and dulness meet.

Of original verse Thomson has left a considerable number of specimens scattered throughout his various collections. Regarding these it is possible to say only that while they might have been better, they might also have been worse. Thomson's Pegasus was but a rocking-horse after all: there was nothing of what Plato calls "the muse's madness" in his soul; and these songs of his, in passing, as they have done, into dumb forgetfulness, have but met their inevitable fate. Some of the airs which

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<sup>1</sup> "Who was that silly body that wanted Burns to alter 'Scots, wha hae,' so as to lengthen the last line, thus—*Edward!* Chains and slavery?"—*The Autocrat*.

he composed for his collections show him to have had the gift of melody in no inconsiderable degree ; and if they had been wedded to words with something of the "ampler ether" in them, they might have taken a place among the nation's songs.

But George Thomson lives not by his original work : he lives by his connection with Burns. It was his own belief, as it was his desire, that this would constitute his title to fame, and his biographer will not therefore be held to wrong him in saying that, but for this connection, he would long since have gone down into the immortality of oblivion. He lives, as Lara lives, in the halo of another's glory.

## THE THOMSON COLLECTIONS

IT seems necessary, in order to the better understanding of the correspondence which is to follow, to give some separate account of the various works which led to that correspondence. It was one of Thomson's fond delusions that his collections of national music would ensure his name's abiding with posterity, "fast anchored in the deep abyss of time." So much he believed to be due to the sheer merit of his works. "My publications," he declared to one of his correspondents, "are not the flimsy productions of a day, but works that will ever stand the test of examination." Alas! who now but the antiquary and the collector seeks to examine them?—who else indeed has an opportunity of examining them? The Thomson collections are as completely neglected as if they had never existed; while the "masterly symphonies and accompaniments," the constant boast of their editor, have long since been dissociated from the airs which were weighted by their ill-matched harmonies and superfluous embellishments.

Thomson edited three separate collections of national song—the Scottish, the Welsh, and the Irish. The Scottish collection was published in six volumes, under the general title of "A Select Collection of original Scottish Airs for the voice,

with introductory and concluding symphonies for the pianoforte, violin, and violoncello." The title-pages of the various volumes bear no dates, but the following are Thomson's own dates of entry at Stationers' Hall as furnished to George Farquhar Graham (Wood's *Songs of Scotland*, Introduction, vi.) :

- Vol. 1.—The first Book or half vol. of *Airs and Songs*, 25 in number, entered at Stationers' Hall . . . . . June 1793.  
 Second Book of ditto; together, a volume . . . . . Aug. 1798.
- Vol. 2.—The 3rd and 4th Books of 50 *Airs and Songs* . . . . . July 1799.
- Vol. 3.—The 5th and 6th Books, of 50 ditto . . . . . July 1802.
- Vol. 4.—The 7th and 8th Books, of 50 ditto . . . . . June 1805.
- Vol. 5.—The 9th and 10th Books, 33 ditto and 32 ditto . . . . . Aug. 1818–1826.
- Vol. 6.—The 11th and 12th Books, of 50 ditto . . . . . Sept. 1841.

It had been Thomson's intention originally to have only five volumes; but in 1822 he tells Allan Cunningham that he has so many fine songs and airs in his portfolio that he will be compelled to have a sixth volume, "greatly against my will." In 1830 he prepared a new edition of the five volumes, which contained twenty additional airs and songs and eight extra illustrations. The original price of each of the first five volumes was a guinea, but Thomson subsequently reduced it to fifteen shillings, at which the sixth volume was published.

The Scottish collection, although the most successful of all Thomson's ventures, was at no time

a really popular work. Hogarth, who had good means of knowing, said it barely paid its costs. The connection of the name of Burns with the earlier volumes gave to them a certain measure of success, but even in the case of these volumes the success was only temporary. The comparative failure of the work was clearly a puzzle to Thomson, who cast about for reasons, without finding any to satisfy him. Now it was the prevailing fashion in favour of Italian music which militated against him ; anon it was some rival work which had caught the fancy of the musical public.

It never once occurred to him that the fault might lie at his own door. That this, however, was the case, only a panegyrist could venture to deny. The fact is that Thomson made a gigantic mistake in the matter of the accompaniments to his songs. The very line of action upon which he so greatly prided himself was one for which we must deny him not only credit, but the possession of judgment and common-sense. To put it frankly, it was the acme of absurdity to go to these eminent continental composers for accompaniments to Scottish airs. Such airs require *intimate* treatment if any ever did ; and, although Thomson could not be brought to realise the fact, it was far more likely that his despised native musicians should do them justice than his much-vaunted Apollos. Beethoven and Haydn, as composers, might be—indeed were—all that Thomson declared them to be ; but they failed nevertheless in the great majority of instances to catch the characteristic style of the music.



Beethoven especially failed, proving once more that the greater the genius, when misapplied, the more signal the failure. It may be that Thomson was partly to blame for this failure. As the writer of the article on Scottish music in Grove's *Dictionary of Music* has remarked, the versions of the airs sent to Beethoven must have been wretchedly bad. They seem to have imbued him with the idea that the "Scotch snap" was the chief feature in the music. He has introduced this "snap" in such profusion, even when quite foreign to the air, that the result is at times nothing short of comical. Yet Thomson, for many years, could not see this. "Beethoven," said he in 1815, "is a genius strikingly original, and has absolutely done wonders for the airs;" and again, a year later: "The originality and exquisite beauty of Beethoven's accompaniments surprise me more and more. They require only to be heard to command admiration." The surprise may be admitted, but it is a surprise that would have been readily exchanged by the Scottish people for a little more appropriateness. Haydn succeeded better, as a rule, but even in his case the result, with few exceptions, is not an eminent success; while as for Weber, Hummel, Pleyel, and Kozeluch, they were still less happy in their endeavours to decorate the Scottish airs.

It must not be supposed that Thomson was left in ignorance of all this. The *Edinburgh Review* indeed (see the number for October 1823) gave him unstinted praise for his "enterprise" in engaging Beethoven and other great composers for his collec-

tion; but, on the other hand, the *Encyclopædia Britannica* spoke out strongly against "the absurd incongruities and monstrosities" of the continental accompaniments. The *Encyclopædia* article was written by Thomson's friend, Farquhar Graham, and the circumstance naturally caused him "inexpressible surprise." In one of his letter-books I find a copy of a long reply to Graham's criticisms, addressed to William Daune, one of the leading musical amateurs of Edinburgh, and Graham's "particular friend." There is no need to quote any part of this reply. Thomson declared that his composers could as little err in fitting accompaniments to the Scottish tunes "as Jeffrey and Scott could have written ungrammatically." Nothing at this time would shake his faith in the men he had employed—not "quires of reasoning" from the most enlightened critics in the country! But his faith *did* get shaken notwithstanding, his purse having taught him a lesson which his head was slow to learn. Sadly he says in 1821: "I have no expectation of ever receiving any benefit from what Beethoven has done for me. He composes for posterity. I hoped that his gigantic genius would bend and accommodate itself to the simple character of national melodies, but in general he has been too learned and eccentric for my purpose, and all my gold ducats have been thrown away." Just so! Experience is an excellent schoolmaster, but unfortunately his fees are high.

In regard to the verses, it is difficult to know what to say. Thomson's intentions were no doubt

excellent, but the plan of employing versifiers of all grades to write to order was bound to fail in a very large proportion of cases. That so many good songs were secured is no less surprising than that so many inferior ones were admitted. These remarks apply to all the three collections—more indeed to the Welsh and Irish than to the Scotch. Nor were the writers of the songs always to be blamed for their want of success: they had to act on instructions. Thomson had a pathetic devotion to “local colour”; if Snowdon or Llangollen could only be introduced into a song it might pass for Welsh at once; while Limerick or Killarney was sufficient to turn a lyric in favour of Ireland. In such manner did he give his orders for a large number of his lyrics. Nor, again, can it be said that he was always justified in the divorcements which he pronounced between old song and old melody. It was a praiseworthy thing, no doubt, to purify the indelicate muse, but the question is whether Thomson did not carry the process too far. Surely there were others to be considered besides his “fair countrywomen.” But what does it all matter now? The law of the survival of the fittest has proved itself here: what of good Thomson was the means of producing has passed into the national song; what was worthless is sunk in mere oblivion.

Thomson’s researches for his collection of Scottish (with Irish) melodies naturally led him to think of the Welsh airs too. In the matter of date the Welsh collection comes next to the Scottish. It was published in three volumes (vol.

i., 1809; vol. ii., 1811; vol. iii., 1814), under the title of "A Select Collection of Original Welsh Airs adapted for the voice, united to characteristic English poetry never before published, with introductory and concluding symphonies and accompaniments for the pianoforte or harp, violin or violoncello." The first volume, Thomson explains to Lady Cunliffe in 1808, would have been published long before but for the circumstance that he decided at the last moment to have an accompaniment for the harp. He says:

After I got all my airs harmonised for the voice and pianoforte I began to think my work would be incomplete if none of the airs had an accompaniment for the pedal harp, more particularly as the Welsh music has all along been played on the harp. The more I thought of this, and of the gradual progress which the pedal harp is making, I became more convinced of my own error in getting the whole airs done for the pianoforte; and in short I sent one half of the airs again to Vienna to be done anew for the harp. But for this you would have seen the first volume long ago; and from the many inquiries after it I believe its non-appearance has been a great loss to me. I flatter myself, however, that in the end I shall be no loser, as the work will now be rendered equally interesting to singers, to pianoforte-players, and to harp-players.

The first volume was published at a guinea, the second and third at fifteen shillings,<sup>1</sup> all subsequently reduced to half-a-guinea. Each volume

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<sup>1</sup> At least this is the (printed) price on the title-pages of the only copies of the second and third volumes which I have been able to see.

contained thirty airs, and there were the usual "embellishments." The accompaniments were divided between Beethoven, Haydn, and Koze'luch, three airs in the second volume being furnished with duplicate accompaniments by the two last-named composers.

Thomson flattered himself that the Welsh public would give him credit "for the high affinities which, with incredible trouble," he had procured for their national melodies, "the value of which is now increased a hundred-fold." But the Welsh were no more impressed with the importance of Thomson's labours on their behalf than were the Irish in connection with *their* national airs. They seem to have freely purchased the first volume of the collection, for in 1812 Thomson is able to say that some six hundred copies of that volume have so far been sold. But the sale did not continue. Early in 1814 Thomson remarks hopefully that "the Welsh work has not yet got into general circulation, but the great merit both of the poetry and the music must sooner or later bring it into the public favour all over the kingdom." A little later, and his hope has given way to something like black despair. Writing to Professor Smyth, he says :

I cannot tell you how much I have been mortified and surprised at the little notice my Welsh work has obtained. One would think that the Cambrians would be proud and fond of their native melodies when presented to them in a form so infinitely more interesting than before, more particularly when united to poetry



that makes all their hills and valleys vocal, and joined to accompaniments by the greatest master that Europe has produced. It will be prized as it deserves *some time*, but I fear not till my copyright has expired, and thus all my anxious exertions and all my expense are to me fruitless.

Fruitless, indeed, I fear they proved, in an artistic as well as in a pecuniary sense. Even in 1811, when only the first two volumes had been published, we have found Thomson negotiating for the sale of the stock and copyright. He makes an offer to Preston in 1812. He feels certain that "the reputation of the work must rise very high in a short time," and he would not think of selling had he "the command of money"—were he not in fact "distressed for cash." The expense actually laid out by him "in journeying to collect the melodies,"<sup>1</sup> in obtaining the symphonies and accompaniments, the poetry, the designs for frontispieces and for engraving those designs, the music plates, titles and other incidents, amounts to £252 for each volume ; "and although he does in his conscience "think each volume worth thrice the original cost to any established music-seller in London," yet, as he is "exceedingly in want of money," he will part with copyright, stock, and plates of both volumes for £500. In other circumstances "no consideration on earth would induce him to resign such a property." Preston declined to purchase, and an application to Messrs. Clementi also proved unsuccessful,

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<sup>1</sup> He sets down the cost of his "journey" at £50.



"on account of the difficulty of the times." Two years passed and Preston was tried again. By this time the cost of the third volume could be estimated, and Thomson puts the amount at £290, making a total of £794 for the three volumes.<sup>1</sup> His price now for the two volumes is reduced to £300; "the third volume you shall have the option of taking or refusing when you see it at £290."

No purchaser would, however, so much as look at the Welsh collection, and Thomson meanwhile continued to do the best that he could to push its sale. That best was little indeed. In 1839 the sale had "practically ceased"; and in 1847 the copyright, plates, and stock (700 volumes) were being offered for £100! Even at this price a buyer could not be found; and at length the collection was thrown in with the others at a merely nominal figure. The work, in short, had practically proved a failure.

The fact is that Thomson was lacking in the requisite qualifications for the editing of a Welsh collection. He did not know the Welsh tongue; he was imperfectly acquainted with the already existing stores of Welsh melody; and in the collecting of airs for his work he put himself too much at the mercy of correspondents in Wales, who might or might not be competent to advise him. It is true that he sought some of his material on the spot; but his method of seeking it was not a safe one, any more than his method of collating it when it had been found. Moreover, he took altogether a

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<sup>1</sup> The symphonies and accompaniments cost him, he says, £236.

wrong view of his functions as an editor. In the selection of airs for the Scottish collection he had avowedly trusted a good deal to "such of my fair friends as I knew to be most conversant with them." His error in connection with the Welsh work was in another direction. He admits that he often made changes on the Welsh melodies in order that verses might the more easily be fitted to them. This of course detracts greatly from the value of his work as a collection of genuine national airs. The accompaniments, too, were as ill-suited to the genius of the melodies as were the accompaniments provided for the Scottish collection. The national characteristics of Welsh music are not so strongly marked as those of Scottish music; but they are sufficiently marked to make a special study of them necessary to the success of an undertaking like Thomson's. If Thomson had been a Welshman, employing Welsh musicians and drawing his songs from purely Welsh sources, he would probably have succeeded. As it was, he spent his money and his time to no end, and then retreated with the petulant and grotesque assertion that "there is scarce a chance that the Welsh collection will ever be rivalled."

The Irish collection was published in two volumes, each containing thirty airs, the first volume in 1814, the second in 1816. It bore the title of "A Select Collection of Original Irish Airs for the voice, united to Characteristic English poetry, written for this work, with symphonies and accompaniments for the pianoforte, violin, and violon-

cello, composed by Beethoven." An engraving of Sir Joshua Reynolds' painting of St. Cecilia formed the frontispiece to the first volume.<sup>1</sup> The price of each volume was originally one guinea, reduced subsequently to half that sum.

In the preface to the first volume Thomson explains that he had begun to collect Irish melodies many years before, but had no idea of publishing them in a separate work till Burns made the suggestion and offered to write songs for them.<sup>2</sup> Encouraged by this promise he "proceeded with alacrity to collect the melodies, and by the kindness of his musical friends . . . he acquired a great variety of the finest old melodies both in print and in manuscript; and year after year he has been adding to the number by every means in his power." He then proceeds to explain that the public would long ago have had the work in their hands but for the difficulties which had arisen over the accompaniments to the airs. Haydn's declining health had obliged him to give up the task, and Beethoven having undertaken it, there followed "years of anxious suspense and teasing disappointment, by the miscarriage of letters and of MSS. owing to the unprecedented difficulty of communication between England and Vienna."

Of course a great deal is said about the "perfectly original" accompaniments of the *magnus Apollo*. If Carolan, the Irish bard, could raise his head and hear his own melodies sung with

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<sup>1</sup> The printing and engraving of this plate cost Thomson £68.

<sup>2</sup> See letter to Thomson of September 1793.

Beethoven's accompaniments, he would idolise the artist who, from his designs, "could produce such exquisitely-coloured and highly-finished pictures." The more critically the music of the collection is examined, the more clearly will it be seen that "extraordinary pains and attention" have been bestowed on it. The whole has been composed *con amore*; and that Beethoven feels conscious of "having rendered the accompaniments worthy of the attention of an enlightened public," may be gathered from the fact that he has announced to the editor his intention of publishing them on the Continent with the verses translated.

But alas! even Beethoven was powerless to move the Irish public. They would have none of the collection thus provided for them at "extraordinary pains." In 1839 we find Thomson writing to the music-sellers proposing a reduction of the price, "because the demand has been next to nothing." The work, "though wholly the doing of Beethoven, and abounding in his exquisitely-charming fancies, is just about as little known to the public as if it were unpublished." Is it not, he sorrowfully asks, extraordinary that such a work should be lying on the shelf?

Long before this he had tried to rid himself of the property. Even when the first volume had been published only a few months, he was offering it to Preston for £200, although it had cost him, according to his own estimate, £294. Later on he offered to sell it for £150, and no one could be found to relieve him of it. Of course the

main cause of the failure was the rival work of Moore, although something must no doubt be set down to the circumstance that Thomson had no proper means of pushing the sale of the collection in Ireland. Thomson came in time to see that he "had perhaps no right to expect success with Moore's songs against me." But at first he took quite an opposite view. In 1816 he replied to some "minor key prophecy" of Professor Smyth by saying that he had three advantages over Moore: "1st, all good judges of music will prefer my work; 2nd, if Beethoven come to England [*cf.* page 322] his compositions will come into fashion; and 3rd, those who have not purchased Irish melodies and look at their bargain will perceive that my two volumes contain as many melodies as are found in Stevenson's five, and that mine are of course little more than half the price of the latter. Thus, with all thinking people I shall succeed." To the same correspondent he says in another letter:

Although Moore's songs are in many instances admirable, and are from their impassioned tone and excessive warmth of colouring likely to be more acceptable than any other to the young and amorous, yet, among persons of taste and feeling for genuine poetry and music I flatter myself that my collection will gradually gain enthusiastic admirers. I do not look for a quick circulation; it may be a number of years before I get back the expense of printing and paper. But when the work comes to be known, and when a relish for admirable, original music shall triumph over that for mere insipid commonplace publication, then will it be in general demand.



For Thomson that time never came. The "meagre, commonplace symphonies and accompaniments of Sir John Stevenson," which he so derided, were preferred to his "admirable and original Beethoven"; and he was left as before to pour out his complaints against a blind and perverse generation.

In 1822 Thomson published an edition in royal octavo, six volumes, containing a selection from all the three folio collections which have now been dealt with. He conceived the idea of this edition two or three years before, but it took him some time to make up his mind to go on with it. In November 1818 he tells Mr Blackwood that though he had got the printer's estimate he was really tired of his labours as an editor, and if Blackwood would buy the engraved plates of the illustrations which Thomson had secured from David Allan he would give up the idea of the octavo edition entirely. The parties, however, as we have already learnt, could not come to terms, and the new edition was therefore published. The price, twelve shillings per volume, was afterwards reduced, first to ten shillings and sixpence and then to eight shillings.

The work, as Thomson wrote to Constable, "contains the essence of my ten volumes folio, with the addition of above fifty melodies or songs acquired by me of late, and not in my folio work." He says that his experience of what the public likes and dislikes has enabled him to improve the collection in every way. He had cut out "such of the melodies in each work as have not caught the public liking"; and with regard to the songs, in the Scottish and



Welsh works particularly, "by omitting some that are but mediocre, and changing others in the *broad* Scottish dialect which are of a cast rather vulgar, for songs of a better and more elevated character," he had rendered the work more generally acceptable. Young people had now lost "all the partiality of their predecessors for songs in broad Scotch, considering the speaking of the dialect to be vulgar, and accordingly it is scarcely practised except by old-fashioned people and those in low life." Therefore has the editor in this new edition "superseded many of the old Scotch songs." The octavo edition seems to have been moderately successful. It had a large variety of material, it contained a series of pleasing illustrations, and it was issued at a moderate price. But other collections were multiplying on all hands, and by-and-by the Thomson volumes were entirely supplanted.

Thomson finally sold all his collections in 1849. In that year and for some time before, he was in frequent correspondence with various firms on the subject. He was growing increasingly feeble, and evidently wanted to set his house in order in view of the inevitable. There is no need to go into any detail about the negotiations. It is sufficient to say that the collections—the Scottish (including the *Jolly Beggars*), Irish, and Welsh, as printed in folio and royal octavo, with all the stock and the plates—were purchased by Mr. George Wood, the Edinburgh music-seller, for the very low sum of £150! No wonder it cost the editor "a struggle to make the sacrifice of parting with these well-beloved works."

They had, according to his own estimate, cost him over £2000<sup>1</sup> in solid cash, to say nothing of the time and trouble expended on them, and now he sells them for a tenth of that amount. Even at that price the purchaser seems to have made nothing out of the collections,<sup>2</sup> and the books again changed hands, the buyer this time being Mr. John Blockley, of London, who retains them for what they may be worth.

Of Thomson's other musical publications mention need only be made of a set of "Six Grand Sonatas" for the piano by Pleyel, and another set of six "upon a similar plan," by Kozeluch. Certain works by Beethoven will be best noticed in dealing with that composer's correspondence.

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<sup>1</sup> One half of this sum he says he paid to musicians and poets in money and in gifts.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. James Bertram, the successor of Mr. George Wood, says there was no demand for the collections, "partly, perhaps, because the accompaniments were not strictly Scotch."

## THOMSON AND BURNS

It was in September 1792 that Thomson addressed his first letter to Burns. The words of the songs he was choosing for his national collection had now become the subject of his anxious consideration, and in looking about for these it was only natural that he should begin by applying to the national poet. Burns' fame had been fully established six years before this, and, moreover, he had been for some time contributing to the *Musical Museum* of Johnson, a work which it was Thomson's honourable ambition to excel. Nor must we lose sight of the additional circumstance that Thomson had met the poet, and, like others, had been carried away by his eloquence. It has indeed been asserted that this was not the case—that Thomson never set eyes upon Burns. In a letter of his to the poet, dated May 1795, there is the following sentence *apropos* of David Allan's sketch of "The Cotter's Saturday Night," which Thomson was sending to Burns: "The figure intended for your portrait I think strikingly like you, as far as I can remember the phiz." The inference here is plain enough, namely, that Thomson is speaking of some occasion when he had seen or met the poet. But Mr. Scott Douglas, in printing the letter (vi. 340), appends this footnote: "That is to say, 'As I remember

the phiz in Beugo's engraving from Nasmyth's picture,' for he never saw Burns in the flesh." This is entirely an error. In a letter to Robert Chambers, of date August 1850, discussing the question of a portrait for the edition of Burns which Chambers was then preparing, Thomson says :

I consider my oil painting of him to be the best extant. It is a duplicate painted by Alexander Nasmyth from the one he painted from the life for the poet's family ; but my duplicate had the peculiar advantage of passing through the hands of my kind and highly-talented friend Sir Henry Raeburn, who, on my solicitation, did me the great favour of revising and retouching the face in my own presence, and gave much of that lustre to the eyes which I well remember in the living man, and upon which I could not help gazing during the only day I ever had the pleasure of dining in his delightful company at Mr. James Simpson's, bookseller.

If Mr. Scott Douglas and others following him had been dependent on this hitherto unpublished letter their error would have been excusable. But Thomson made a like statement in print. In the sixth volume of Hogg's *Instructor* (1851, p. 409) there is a long letter from his pen, to which he adds the following postscript : "The charms of Burns' conversation may well make us regret that he was not, like Johnson, attended by a Boswell. I speak from experience, for I once had the delight to dine in a small party with him." The occasion of the meeting thus referred to must have been during Burns' sojourns in Edinburgh in the winters of 1786 and

1787; for we know that from the time when, on the 24th of March 1788, he turned his back on the capital, the poet never was in it for more than a day's visit. The matter is of no great importance, but it certainly seems advisable to correct the statement that Thomson never saw the man with whose name his own has been so intimately connected. It is quite likely that he saw him more than once, for did not Burns occasionally make one of the audience at the concerts in Niddry's Wynd?

I do not forget that there is a letter of Burns to Cunningham dated March 3, 1794, in which Burns says that he is sorry he did not know Thomson when he was in Edinburgh. He proposes that Cunningham and Thomson shall meet him half-way during the summer at the Bield Inn, where "we will pour out a drink offering before the Lord, and enter into a Solemn League and Covenant, never to be broken nor forgotten." Thomson heard of this "plot" from Cunningham, and on April 17 he tells Burns that he hopes the meeting will take place, "but your bacchanalian challenge almost frightens me, for I am a miserably weak drinker." The meeting never came off, and so Thomson had not the privilege of a personal acquaintance with Burns. But that is a different thing from saying that he never saw the poet.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This question of Thomson's having or not having seen Burns is a curiously annoying one to the biographer. As these sheets are passing through the press a letter reaches me from Robert Chambers' daughter, Mrs. Annie Dowie, stating that "The great regret of George Thomson's later life was that he and Burns never met."

The correspondence which passed between Burns and Thomson is already well known to students and admirers of the poet, and here it will therefore be necessary to refer only to such portions of it as more closely concern the main subject of this volume. Burns addressed in all fifty-six letters to Thomson, from the first, written in answer to Thomson's application in September 1792, down to the final letter despatched from Brow on the 12th of July 1796, when "curst necessity" compelled him to implore Thomson for five pounds. The originals of Burns' letters, as well as of his songs, were purchased by Lord Dalhousie in November 1852 at the sale of Thomson's effects. Thomson evidently put a high value upon the manuscripts, for in a letter addressed by him to Mr. Nisbet, auctioneer, dated 28th November 1844, in reply to inquiries made concerning the correspondence, he wrote: "I have to acquaint you that I am possessed of all the letters and songs in MS. which

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Mrs. Dowie, being confronted by Thomson's own statements to the contrary, as printed in the text, willingly admits that her memory may be deceiving her. But what are we to make of the following? In a lecture (I have only now seen a copy of it) delivered before a meeting of the Dumfries Antiquarian Society in March 1890 by Mr. J. R. Wilson of Sanquhar, it is asserted that in a letter of Dr. Patrick Neill to Mr. Grierson, one of the secretaries of the Dumfries Mausoleum Committee, this statement occurs: "I had the satisfaction of seeing old George Thomson last week. He tells me he never saw Robert Burns, although he corresponded so much with him, and got him to write some of his finest words for the old Scotch airs." If Thomson ever said this to Dr. Neill, I must leave his "shade" to reconcile his own statements. Neill's letter is dated February 4, 1850, when Thomson was in his dotage. But then what about the statements of the same year as quoted on p. 135?



our immortal bard wrote for my work. They are all nicely laid down by the *artiste* paster of the Register House, and elegantly bound in a folio volume. Tell your friend that I hold the bard's letters to be above any price, and will not sell them." This was the identical folio volume purchased by Lord Dalhousie.

The originals of the letters sent by Thomson to Burns are of course not included in the volume. They were obtained from the family after Burns' death, and, as Mr Scott Douglas remarks, perhaps not even Dr. Currie was allowed to see them thereafter. Currie informs his readers that "the whole of this correspondence [as published in 1800] was arranged for the press by Mr. Thomson, and has been printed with little addition or variation." What the term "arranged for the press" precisely signifies we cannot now tell; but if Thomson did make any alterations in the text of his letters, as Mr. Scott Douglas insinuates, they must have been very slight, and such as in no way materially to affect their main contents. At the same time it is but right to remark that Thomson was not too particular in the matter of textual exactness, even with regard to the letters of Burns. "I presume Dr. Currie will think it right to substitute some other word for *sodomy*," said he in reference to a phrase in the poet's letter to him of September 16, 1792. And so Dr. Currie has "prostitution of soul"! How many more alterations Thomson may have suggested it is impossible to say. Nor does it matter. The Burns letters are now before the

world exactly as Burns wrote them. For this we are indebted to Mr Scott Douglas, who was fortunately able to print directly from the autographs in Lord Dalhousie's possession.

During his own lifetime Thomson suffered keenly from the charge that he had taken an unfair advantage of Burns, in accepting so much from the poet without making him any substantial pecuniary return. The charge still hangs about Thomson's name in a vague sort of way, for in affairs of this kind the dog who has once acquired a bad repute is likely to retain it. The unfortunate editor, as he puts it himself, was assailed, "first anonymously, and afterwards, to my great surprise, by some writers who might have been expected to possess sufficient judgment to see the matter in its true light." He defended himself, in the words of one of his calumniators, "about once every seven years"; but it is not until the appearance of Professor Wilson's onslaught in the *Land of Burns* (1838) that his correspondence begins to show the full extent of his suffering under the lash.

Wilson covers some seven pages of quarto in discussing the matter. He goes into it in great detail, and with that tiresome redundancy of diction and "blather" (to use a favourite term of his own) for which he was famous. Quoting from Thomson's letter of July 1793, written on the occasion of his sending the poet £5, he prints the phrase "When I find it convenient" in italics, and exclaims—"A bank-note for five pounds! In the

name of the prophet—Figs!" This is a fair sample of his "criticism." Continuing, he says: "Burns, with a very proper feeling, retained the trifle, but forbade the repetition of it; and everybody must see at a glance that such a man could not have done otherwise—for it would have been most degrading indeed had he shown himself ready to accept a five-pound note when it might happen to suit the convenience of an editor. His domicile was not in Grub Street." Just so! Burns' domicile was never in Grub Street, and that was precisely why from the first he declined to take money from Thomson.

There is in the correspondence, as I have indicated, a great deal of matter regarding this Wilson onslaught. Thomson naturally was somewhat restive under Christopher's "tinkler jaw" (he uses the phrase himself), and he has much to say to various correspondents about the "shamefulness" of thus disturbing an old man's peace of mind. "Anonymous scribblers," he remarks in one letter, "I have ever disregarded; but from a gentleman who knows me and what my conduct in life has been I cannot help being annoyed by taunts and censures which I have not at all deserved." He begs the publishers of the *Land of Burns* to "ask Mr. Wilson, as a gentleman, in my name, what he would have done if he had stood in my situation." And so on.

It is necessary, or at least advisable, to examine the whole question for ourselves with some minuteness. From the very outset it was clearly Thomson's desire and intention to pay Burns. When

he first wrote to him asking his aid on behalf of the new enterprise, he said expressly :

We shall esteem your poetical assistance a particular favour, besides paying any reasonable price you shall please to demand for it. Profit is quite a secondary consideration with us, and we are resolved to spare neither pains nor expense on the publication.

This was perfectly clear. But how did Burns receive the suggestion? Writing to Thomson immediately after the receipt of his letter, he declares that the request for assistance will "positively add to my enjoyments in complying with it"; and he goes on to say that he will enter into the undertaking with such abilities as he possesses, "strained to their utmost exertion by the impulse of enthusiasm." It is quite apparent that Burns was as anxious to be of use to Thomson as Thomson was to avail himself of his assistance; and this was the case even after the novelty of the work had begun to wear off. "You cannot imagine," says he, writing to Thomson on April 7, 1793—"you cannot imagine how much this business has added to my enjoyment. What with my early attachment to ballads, your book and ballad-making are now as completely my hobby as ever fortification was my uncle Toby's." But the poet was still more explicit on the matter. He says :

As to remuneration, you may think my songs either *above* or *below* price; for they shall absolutely be the one or the other. In the honest enthusiasm with which I embark in your undertaking, to talk of money, wages, hire, &c., would be downright sodomy of soul!

This also was plain enough. He spurned, as even Wilson himself confesses, the gentle and guarded proffer of remuneration in money, and set to work, as he had always done, in the spirit of love, "assured from sweet experience that inspiration was its own reward." But we do not find that Thomson was anxious to take advantage of the fine independent spirit of the poet as thus exemplified. In Messrs. Henley and Henderson's recent edition of Burns we read (iii. 294) that—"As he says nothing of Burns' admirable generosity, it is reasonable to infer that the idea of payment would have been unwelcome to his mind." It is reasonable to infer nothing of the kind. The insinuation is wholly gratuitous. Why should that be unwelcome to Thomson's mind when he came to write a second letter which was so evidently not unwelcome when he wrote his first? In a communication addressed to *Tait's Magazine* in 1845 he remarks on the very passage quoted above: "Delighted with this frank and ready compliance, but regretting the sturdy, erroneous independence of spirit that led him to decline any recompense for his songs, I deemed it prudent to defer arguing the point with him, hoping that in the course of our correspondence I would get him persuaded to view it more properly."

So far, indeed, was Thomson from failing to realise his obligation that when his first volume was published, containing six pieces from Burns' pen, he, to quote his own words, "ventured with all delicacy to send the poet a pecuniary present,



notwithstanding what he had said on that subject." On this point the original letter, which is dated 1st July 1793, may be quoted. Thomson writes :

I cannot express how much I am obliged to you for the exquisite new songs you are sending me ; but thanks, my friend, are a poor return for what you have done. As I shall be benefited by the publication you must suffer me to enclose a small mark of my gratitude [the sum sent was £5], and to repeat it afterwards when I find it convenient. Do not return it, for, by Heaven ! if you do, our correspondence is at an end ; and although this would be no loss to you, it would mar the publication which, under your auspices, cannot fail to be respectable and interesting.

Burns replied to this as one would, after reading his first letter to Thomson, have expected him to reply. This is what he says :

I assure you, my dear sir, that you truly hurt me with your pecuniary parcel. It degrades me in my own eyes. However, to return it would savour of bombast affectation ; but as to any more traffic of that debtor and creditor kind, I swear by that HONOR which crowns the upright statue of ROBERT BURNS' INTEGRITY—on the least motion of it I will indignantly spurn the by-past transaction, and from that moment commence entire stranger to you ! Burns' character for generosity of sentiment and independence of mind will, I trust, long outlive any of his wants which the cold unfeeling ore can supply ; at least I shall take care that such a character he shall deserve.

Here, then, was the rock on which Thomson was to be wrecked—the noble pride and independence of a poet who resented a pecuniary gift as



sincerely as Johnson resented the present of the shoes thoughtfully placed at his door at Oxford. If Burns had not taken this stand, Thomson would have paid him as he paid others of his helpers, and nothing would have been heard of the "penuriousness" of the hapless editor. And why should Burns have declined to be paid? Proud as he was, it must assuredly have cost him something in the way of self-denial to write the letter last quoted. He was certainly not so poor as he is sometimes represented to have been; yet, as his biographers have shown, at this very date, that is to say in July 1793, a few pounds would have been of material service to him. It will be readily admitted, as Mr. Wallace remarks (Chambers' Burns, iii. 440), that Burns could never have been comfortable under the burden of even the smallest debt; yet there is evidence that the trifle (ten shillings) due to Jackson of the *Dumfries Journal* for advertising the sale of his stock was now, after twenty months, still unpaid. It was discharged on the 12th of July, probably out of the very money transmitted by Thomson.

All this, however, only brings out in sharper relief the highly honourable sentiment which animated him in his dealings with Thomson. Lockhart and others have expressed their surprise at his persistent repudiation of the pecuniary indebtedness which Thomson so clearly recognised. They quote Burns as admitting to Carfrae that "the profits of the labours of a man of genius are, I hope, as honourable as any profits whatever"; and they remind us that he made no objections about accepting

hundreds of pounds from Creech on account of his poems. But there was manifestly some difference between accepting the profits of a work published in the ordinary course of business, and taking money from an enthusiastic amateur, the pecuniary success of whose undertaking must have been felt by Burns to be purely problematical. Even the redoubtable Wilson admits the reasonableness of this view of the case. "Would Robert Burns," he asks in his usual rhetorical fustian, "condescend to receive money for his contributions to a work in honour of Scotland, undertaken by men with whom profit was quite a secondary consideration? Impossible!" The poet had declined to accept payment from Johnson, and afterwards found his justification in the fact that the *Museum* was not a commercial success. Thomson's sanguine temperament foresaw a brighter future for *his* enterprise, but Burns, who was not without a certain business faculty, may have regarded the venture with less ardent anticipation, and have good-naturedly resolved not to increase the editor's probable losses by accepting any wage.

The truth is that Burns declined to write deliberately for money. He would—in a patriotic undertaking of this kind at any rate—write for love, or not write at all. If his poems brought him a profit—well, they were not written with that profit directly in view; the pecuniary return was, as it were, but an accident, not affecting in any way the inception of the work. This was practically his view of the matter as expressed to Thomson. It appears that he expressed the same view also to others. In

a brief memoir of the poet, printed in the *Scots Magazine* for January 1797, the statement is explicitly made that he considered it beneath him to be an author by profession. "A friend," says the anonymous writer, "knowing his family to be in great want, urged the propriety and even necessity of publishing a few poems, assuring him of their success, and showing the advantage that would accrue to his family through it. His answer was: 'No; if a friend desires me, and if I'm in the mood for it, I'll write a poem, but I'll be d—d if ever I write for money.'" In short, his songs were to be, as he said, either invaluable or of no value. "I do not need your guineas for them:" such, in effect, were his words.

What, then, in the circumstances was to be expected of Thomson further? He had gone as far with Burns as it was prudent for him to go in the interests of his own enterprise; and if he now kept silence on the pecuniary question it was certainly not because he failed to realise that he was the debtor of the poet. His correspondence shows very conclusively that it was a matter of conscience with him to pay all his workers, either in cash, or by gifts of various kinds when cash was declined, as it usually was in the case of the poets. His first letters to the eminent musicians whom he engaged on behalf of his collection almost invariably state the terms he is prepared to give, and in some cases these terms are higher than need have been paid for the class of work to be done. Why should it be suggested that he meant

to treat Burns in a manner different from his treatment of others? He was assuredly not without his anxieties in the matter of rewarding the poet. In a letter sent to the editor of *Tait's Magazine* he remarks, *apropos* of the old Wilson attack :

The poet continued his pleasant writing. I felt anxious to show him my sense of his great liberality, by sending him a few presents such as I thought he could not well refuse. Accordingly I got the ingenious artist David Allan to paint for him *con amore* the interesting scene of family worship from *The Cotter's Saturday Night*, which he thankfully received. I also sent him a Scoto-Indian shawl for Mrs. Burns, and a gold seal with his coat of arms engraved on it from his own curious heraldic design. These cost me but five and twenty guineas, and I freely confess were more suited to my means than to the poet's deserts. But if the prosperous critic himself [this of course refers to Wilson] had stood in my situation with a small income and a large family, who knows whether his own largesses would have exceeded mine? Well did my friends know how gladly I would have tried a race of generosity even with him, if the power had been brother to the will. But Wilson knew me not, as in those evil times an ultra Tory held little communion with a Whig, and he and I were and are strangers to each other.

"A small income and a large family." Yes; that has to be borne in mind. When at last Thomson had an opportunity of pecuniarily rewarding Burns, in however small a way, he did what was asked of him cheerfully and with alacrity. Burns—ill, and trying to get along on half his salary as an exciseman, threatened by a lawyer on account of

a paltry tailor's bill of £7, 9s.—wrote in despair to his cousin, James Burness, and to Thomson. He asked £5 from Thomson, and Thomson sent that sum at once. He has been blamed for not sending more. But let us remember his position at the time. He was only a clerk with a salary of £100 a year, as I am glad to have been able to show in view of this discussion. Moreover, whatever Thomson expected his collection to become, the work was at this time all outlay and all risk. The outlay was undoubtedly beyond his means, and at the most only small sums could so far have come in to cover his large expenditure. That expenditure was growing and came to be enormous, especially on the musical side, so as almost, in the words of Lord Cockburn, to justify Thomson's friends in "impeaching his prudence with having anything to do with it." Wilson affirms in the most dogmatic way that for his outlay "he had been compensated by the profits of the sale of the collection"; that "these profits had then been considerable and have since been great"; and that for "nearly half a century" the Scottish collection "must have been yielding him a greater annual income than the poet would have enjoyed had he been even a supervisor." This is a gross exaggeration. But even if it were true, it has no bearing upon the particular point at issue. Thomson might have come into a fortune in 1797, but what of that if he were a poor man in 1796, when Burns asked his help? "I had," he says in one of his letters, "but a small income at the



time I was corresponding with the poet, and was obliged to borrow money from my warm-hearted friend Cunningham to pay part of the large expenses of bringing out my work." And again: "Before the time of his [Burns'] death I had published merely half a volume—or twenty-five songs—of my work (six of them of his writing), so that those who supposed or still suppose that I had then made money by my publication are quite mistaken." It should not have been necessary for Thomson to say even this much in his own defence. Yet it is well to have his own statement on the point. Mr. Scott Douglas says (vi. 214) that "whatever was his financial condition about the period of Burns' death, when poverty was made a plea to shelter him from charges of penuriousness in his dealings with the poet and his family, he certainly soon thereafter attained a prosperous worldly position." Thomson, as we have seen, undoubtedly did in the end reach an easy position in life, but it was assuredly not "soon thereafter." As late as 1812 we have found him making resolute efforts to sell the stock and copyrights of certain of his collections at an immense sacrifice because, as he expresses it in one letter, he is "distressed for want of cash"; and there is plenty of evidence to show that the "distress" was not temporary, but extended over a very considerable part of the time when he was foolishly (as his friends believed) wasting his money in making collections for people who did not want them.

Remembering all this, we cannot fail to see that



the situation was not one in which Thomson was entitled—the word is used advisedly—to be ostentatious in his donations, or to pose as the wealthy patron of this neglected poet. So far, indeed, was he from being in a “prosperous worldly position” that he had actually to borrow the five pounds which he sent to Burns in 1796. Allan Cunningham made the statement in his life of the poet, and Thomson himself repeats it in a letter of June 30, 1843, addressed to Messrs. Blackie, the Glasgow publishers, who were then preparing an edition of Burns. The letter is mainly a rebutment of the Wilson charge. In the course of it, speaking particularly of the £5 matter, he says :

Perhaps the professor thinks I was to blame in not sending *more* than the sum asked. If this has provoked his ire I would merely say that I was not then burdened with money, and had to borrow of a friend the £5 I sent. And on consulting two of the poet's most intimate friends whether I should enlarge the sum, they both were of opinion that if I sent more than the poet asked there would be a greater risk of offending than of pleasing him in the excited and nervous state in which the altered character of his handwriting showed him to be. What the professor may have chosen to say of me I know not,<sup>1</sup> but this I say, that if my conduct in regard to Burns, from beginning to end, be investigated fairly and candidly, with the utmost strictness, I have not the slightest fear of the result.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomson did not himself see Wilson's essay until the summer of 1845, when, “calling on my friend Colonel Burns,” he found a copy of the *Land of Burns* on his table.

These last words from Thomson's own pen cannot well be bettered by the biographer, and with them we may be content to take our leave of the matter. Elsewhere he declares that he loved Burns as a brother, and "would have shared his last shilling with him." In that declaration I believe him to have been thoroughly sincere.

## CORRESPONDENCE ABOUT THE SONGS

### SIR WALTER SCOTT

"SONG-WRITING is not Walter Scott's forte; for once that he succeeds he far more frequently fails." Such was Thomson's declaration to one of his correspondents in 1814. Four years later he tells the same correspondent that Scott has "not a jot of the true relish and feeling for elegant music, nor Hogg, nor any other poet on this side of the Tweed." Of course without that relish Scott was deficient in a very necessary qualification as a writer for Thomson's collections! Unfortunately it took the editor some time to find this out, just as it took him some time to find out that Beethoven as a harmoniser of Scottish melodies was a failure. And yet, even as early as 1811, he had come to think it necessary to instruct Scott in the art of song-writing. "I need not observe to you," says he, "that each stanza of a national song should be constructed in the same form with the first stanza, and that there should not be the least deviation in regard to the measure or to the situation of the single or double rhymes." Some men would have felt mightily indignant at such attempts to teach

them their own trade ; but Scott, with his wonted large-heartedness, and diffident, no doubt, in regard to points partly musical, accepted Thomson's instruction, and from beginning to end of the correspondence showed no signs of impatience.

The earliest of the extant letters from Scott to Thomson is dated November 1805, but Thomson had been corresponding with him before this, and, of course, the two could see each other at any time, being both resident in Edinburgh. There is evidence that the idea of asking help from Scott came from Joanna Baillie. Writing to Thomson on February 18, 1805, she says : " I have been very much delighted lately in reading Walter Scott's *Lay of the Last Minstrel*. I hope you have some assistance from him, if he condescends to write songs. He has the true spirit of a poet in him, and long may he flourish." Thomson wrote to Scott soon after he received this. His first letter is dated 30th March, when he sends a couple of Welsh airs, to be furnished with words. In this letter he begs that Scott will give him leave to mention "one expression in your 'Dying Bard' which may, perhaps, be thought objectionable." The expression, it appears, was "glories of shade," which, to Thomson's mind, conveyed incongruous ideas, but which Scott, nevertheless, retained. Thomson had a positive passion for the normal, any divergence from which thoroughly upset him. But greater men had suffered so before him. Was it not Bentley himself who could not away with Milton's "No light, but rather darkness visible" ?

The following letter, the first of Scott's, is in answer to one of Thomson's not now in existence. The song, as we gather from the next letter, was to celebrate Nelson's recent victory and death at Trafalgar. The letter is dated November 1805 :

I will be happy to see you in the course of the forenoon, though I have great diffidence in undertaking the task you propose. Should I be successful, I will exchange the musical property of the song against a copy of Ducange's Glossary now in Laing's shop, I retaining the literary property, that is the exclusive right of printing the words when unconnected with music. The book may be worth about ten or twelve guineas.

The next letter, dated March 1806, requires no comment further than what is afforded by Thomson's letter which follows it :

I am greatly to blame for not having before informed you of what I have myself been long sensible, my total incapacity to compose anything on the subject of Lord Nelson's glorious victory and death that could be in the least serviceable to your elegant collection. I assure you I have not relinquished a task so pleasing to myself without repeated attempts to execute it, but what would not even please the author was still less likely to stand any competition with its companions in your selected specimens of poetry and music. I have given Mr. Laing directions to transfer the Ducange to another account, but in relinquishing the prize of my intended labours I am much more mortified by my own failure in not producing anything that could be creditable to myself or agreeable to you.

Thomson is not dismayed by this letter. He writes

on the 12th of June to express his regret that Scott has not been able to satisfy himself "in singing of our great naval hero," but he will still pay for the Ducange if the poet will write "two charming songs on *any* subject." Assured of his compliance, he sends him a couple of Welsh airs, one "The monks of Bangor," the other "The Sheriff's fancy," for which Rogers had been tried the year before. There is another very favourite Welsh air called "Black Sir Harry" (a great captain some centuries ago), for which, if Scott "would be pleased to indite a dozen or sixteen lines only," he would present him with "two beautiful drawings, the one of the Abbey of Dunfermline, the other of Doune Castle, which I am certain you will like." The reply to this is a letter of July 23, 1806. The "enclosed squib" I have been unable to trace. Was it from Scott's own pen? Thomson in acknowledging it says: "I had seen your squib before, and am glad to possess a copy." Of course "your squib" might mean "the squib you send," but that hardly seems likely. Mr. Andrew Lang suggests to me that Scott probably refers to the *Miseries of Human Life* (Lockhart, iii. 2):

I have not been inattentive to your request, though much pressed with business, both literary and official. I enclose you the beginning of a war song imitated from the Morlachian. It is a fragment, but could easily be completed if you think it will suit the character of the tune called "The Sheriff's fancy." The verses are uncommonly dashing. The massacre of the monks of Bangor suggests a subject, which is always a great ad-



vantage. I therefore prefer it to "Black Sir Harry,"<sup>1</sup> and will endeavour to send you some verses suited to it before I leave town. In case you have not seen the enclosed squib I beg your acceptance of a copy. It has made much noise in London.

The fragment of the war-song enclosed in the letter ran as follows :

What yonder glimmers so white on the mountain,  
Glimmers so white where yon sycamores grow?

Is it wild swans around Vaga's fair fountain,

Or is it a wreath of the wintry snow?

Had it been snow glimmers white on the mountain,

By this it had melted before the bright day;

Had it been swans around Vaga's fair fountain,

They had stretched their broad pinions and sped them away.

It is not then swans round the fountain of Vaga,

It is not a wreath of the wintry snow;

It is the gay tints of the fierce Asan Aga,

Glimmering so white where those sycamores grow.

This is surely poor stuff; one feels that only a *quod erat demonstrandum* is needed to make it a very fair parody of Euclid's *ad absurdum* method of proof. Thomson professed to think it "very fine," promising "great things," though how he could have imagined that such wire-drawn rhetoric could make a good song passes understanding. Fortunately he discovered that it would not suit the measure of the tune for which it had been intended, and so, untaught by experience, he asks Scott to try another theme. "What," he says,

<sup>1</sup> "In July 1811 sent him [Scott] the Welsh air called 'Black Sir Harry,' with a request that he would write a song for it of the same measure with Campbell's song, 'O cherub content,' which I wrote under the air by way of example."—*Summary of a letter to Scott.*

"would you think of an ode to rural happiness in compliment to the fair recluses, Lady Butler and Lady Ponsonby, whose cottage forms one of the charms of Llangollen Vale? I conceive that you could write a charming song on this subject." Thomson, no doubt, had seen the "fair recluses" in the course of his Welsh ramble, as De Quincey saw them later on (*Confessions*, 1856, p. 121). The ladies lived for some fifty years in seclusion; portraits of them and their cottage are often met with. What Scott said to the suggestion of a song on this theme we do not know.

There is evidently a letter of Thomson's missing between the date of this (July 24, 1806) and the following letter of Scott's, dated in October. The two songs now sent were "When the heathen trumpets clang" (for "The monks of Bangor's march") and "On Ettrick Forest's mountains dun," written, as Thomson notes, "after a week's shooting and fishing in which the poet had been engaged with some friends." Both songs are, in some editions of Scott's works, erroneously dated several years later :

Be so good as to receive fair copies of the two songs. You will see I have attended to your criticisms in most instances, and I have added another stanza to "The monks of Bangor." I have also altered, and I think improved, "The Sheriff's fancy," and beg you will be so kind as to destroy the foul copy which you have. I think I have made as much of both as I can do at present, but I would like to see them in the proof copy in case any minute alterations may yet occur to me, and

also to ensure their being correctly printed. I hope they will answer your wishes. . . .

My critical friends think "The monks" improve by wanting the double rhymes. I will take care to give no copies.

After this the correspondence drops until 1809, when it is resumed by a letter of November 14 from Thomson. This time he sends Scott a couple of Irish airs, and not feeling himself entitled to ask songs for them "without endeavouring to make you a recompense," he begs leave to offer "a suit of damask table linen, which, on account of its superior excellence, both in the design and the fabric, has this day obtained to the manufacturer one of the highest premiums given by the Board of Trustees." The damask accompanies the letter. Two days afterwards Scott writes from Castle Street :

I will readily try the melodies, although the guerdon is far beyond the value of anything I can hope to produce. Mrs. Scott having once set eyes upon it, I am afraid I have no choice left but to do the best I can. As that best may be indifferent I make you welcome, with the Ballantynes' consent, which I daresay you can obtain, to use in your publication a hunting song ["Waken ! lords and ladies gay"]<sup>1</sup> and some verses called "The Violet," which I gave them for a little miscellany which J. Ballantyne is now printing.

Nearly eighteen months passed before Scott did anything further in return for his "guerdon." Thomson had sent him the airs, with the remark

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<sup>1</sup> This was set by Thomson to the air "The Sheriff's fancy," in the 3rd vol. of the Welsh collection.

that he would "willingly wait the muse's leisure," for he would not withdraw her attention from more pressing and important subjects. But the muse's leisure did not accord with the editor's convenience, and Thomson had twice to remind Scott of the promise before meeting with any practical result. The following letter, dated April 30, 1811, accompanies the verses on "The British light dragoon," which Scott (see also his next letter) at first desired to be anonymous :

The preceding page contains a few tawdry stanzas to one of the airs you recommended, which I indited yesterday at Bank House on my journey here. The words begin "There was an ancient fair," and an old newspaper which I found in the inn suggested the application of the tune to the late splendid exploits of our horse near Campo Mayor, for which the burthen is very well adapted. As I intend to send you two songs besides, I think it will be unnecessary to prefix my name to this little rough effusion, which can have no effect unless when sung, and which I have studiously kept thin of poetry in hopes of giving it a martial and popular cast. Let me know if you like the lines, and if you think them quite adapted for so elegant a publication as yours. I will send you "The bed in the barn" to-morrow, or next day at furthest.

Sir Alexander Boswell was shortly afterwards (August 17, 1811) applied to successfully for words to "The bed in the barn," so that Scott's song was evidently regarded as unsuitable for the tune. Scott, as will be seen from a subsequent letter, confesses to not having "a particle of poetical humour" in his composition, and doubtless Thomson

found that in this case he had failed to meet the supposed requirements of the air.

The following letter, dated May 1811, is not altogether explained by extant letters of Thomson. Of course there would be meetings between editor and contributor which would sometimes obviate the necessity of written communications on one side or the other. As to "Chirke Castle," for which Mrs. Hunter provided words, Thomson had written to Scott on the 15th of April: "I should be very glad if you would write a song for the Welsh air, 'The minstrelsy of Chirke Castle,' which is but poorly provided with verses."

I return the song. The lines cannot be better cut down than you have done it yourself, but in the pattern sent there were eight syllables, not six. Observe—

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Her	quiz	- zing	glass	and	dia	- mond	ring.

Right by all the rules of Cocker. I only mention this in vindication of my own accuracy, for I counted both the lines and notes. It does not make the least difference in the sense. As to giving a copy, I never had one except that which I sent to you, so that I should be sure to observe your caution. I sent you "The bed in the barn" the other day, thinking it was in the greatest hurry. I like the melody of "Chirke Castle" and the stanza very well, but the name Chirke is enough to put the whole world's teeth on edge. I don't mean to observe any secret about "The light dragoon," only it's not just the sort of thing that one solemnly puts their [*sic*] name to. I will send the "minstrelsy" [of Chirke Castle] to-morrow or next day. Why was it not the minstrelsy of *Kilgarvon* or *Conway*?



Meanwhile, on the 23rd of May, Thomson had again tried Scott with more melodies. One was "the Highland air called by Gow 'Lord Balgonie's favourite'"; another was a Scottish air which was to have a song "on the subject of the massacre of Glencoe, to the measure of 'Hohenlinden.'" The first, it will be seen, he was willing to try; the second he accomplished very successfully in his "Oh tell me, harper," published in the sixth volume of Thomson's collection. Scott now writes from Ashestiel :

I am not sorry "Lord Langley"<sup>1</sup> does not answer, for I am certain I can make a pretty tale of it by taking it out of its strait jacket. I believe you will find few if any lines in it which exceed seven syllables, which was all I looked to or really understand anything about. It is impossible for me to attempt this tune again, not having any idea of what words would suit it, and being, moreover, incompetent to anything requiring liveliness and jollity. I have not a particle of poetical humour in my composition. A military or romantic song I may get at, but there I stop. I will therefore far rather try the Highland air, and as I shall be in town on Monday, when I can have the advantage of hearing you sing it, I will be in less danger of repeating my errors. I am very sorry for your disappointment, and willing to do my best to repair it, but you are sensible you have only my eyes to trust to ; ears *au fait de musique* I have none.

Thomson frequently suggests that Scott should hear him sing over the airs for which he wished to have

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<sup>1</sup> This must refer to "The bed in the barn," which requires lines of seven syllables.



words, and no doubt there were many meetings at Castle Street for that purpose.

Scott's next letter simply assures Thomson that only "very particular and pressing business of my own, as well as the necessity of attending the circuit," have prevented him from getting the required songs ready, but he goes to Ashestiel on Monday, and hopes then to be at leisure to fulfil all his engagements. In July (1811) he writes to Thomson from Edinburgh:

After repeated trials, I can make nothing of "Chirke Castle" that would be in the least satisfactory. The recurrence of the eternal double rhymes and the short structure of the verse renders it unfit (at least in my hands) for anything very pretty, and I am really more jealous of these little things than of long poems. I am much better pleased with "Glencoe," which I have finished in the rough. The death of the two great men who made part of the social company at Mr. Wauchope's the last time we met has broken two strings of my heart. I will send you "Glencoe" the instant I have got this damned Spaniard, whose national sloth is infectious, out of my hands. He is now almost finished.<sup>1</sup>

Early in November Scott sends "Glencoe," remarking that if Thomson likes it generally he can probably improve it in correction. It may be

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<sup>1</sup> This refers to *The Vision of Don Roderick*, published in July. The death of the "two great men" was mentioned by Scott in the original preface to the poem as an event which had "cruelly interrupted his task." One was his friend the Lord President of the Court of Session (Blair), the other his early patron, Henry Dundas, Viscount Melville.

as well to quote what Thomson says about the song. He writes on November 24 :

I have read "Glencoe," with which I am perfectly delighted. It is a most admirable composition, and will do you immortal honour. I cannot express the satisfaction I shall have in uniting it to music, and giving it to the world. Will you pardon me if I ask you to reconsider the second line of the second stanza—

The mist-wreath has the mountain crest.

Is not this rather obscure? The last line of the same stanza, too, might be improved: "Faithless butchery" is not a happy expression. Probably these lines were in your view, as you speak of making some corrections, though I do not think you have left much to do in that way, for in every stanza I find great vigour, a high strain of poetry, and the happiest choice of words. Nothing could be more sublime than the burst of indignation with which the harper concludes.

It would be good for the music if you could throw the emphasis upon the second syllable of the third line of the first stanza, as you have done to the same syllable in each third line of the other stanzas. Instead of "down," if you were to write "adown," and then take a word of one syllable for "bosom," the line would suit the melody perfectly. I know not whether there was a wood in Glencoe; if there was, the line might be: "Adown the dark wood of Glencoe." I am happy to find that you have almost finished the Irish song. When entirely convenient for you to finish it, I shall be extremely glad to receive it.

Some of these suggestions, it will be found, were adopted; others were not. The next letter of Scott encloses "The return to Ulster," which

Thomson printed as the first song in his Irish collection :

I send you the *prima cura* of the Irish song, reserving corrections till I know how you like it and how it suits the music. I am apt to write eleven instead of twelve syllables in this measure, which does well enough for metrical rhythm, but not for musical. The foot can easily be supplied where omitted. I am very glad you like "Glencoe." I have retained no copy of either, nor indeed did I even write any foul copy, so that I cannot be teased with requests for copies, which it is often unpleasant to grant and churlish to refuse.

Thomson writes at once to say that he likes the Irish song extremely. "Every line breathes the delightful enthusiasm 'of joys that are past in the happiest manner." But he is still unsatisfied with "Glencoe," Scott having paid no heed to one of his former objections. Though there is great propriety and beauty in the question, "Say, harp'st thou to the mists that fly?" yet, "with the utmost deference to the poet," he doubts "the correctness of the line in the second stanza which personifies the mist, and puts it exactly on the same footing with the stag and the eagle." The line "would be thought obscure by most readers." Taken with its context, there is no obscurity whatever in the line, and Scott rightly retained it in spite of Thomson's objections.

In December (still 1811) Scott writes enclosing some revised songs, remarking that he will "call one morning to hear the melodies," and adding that "the difficulty with me in song-writing is not

to find verses but to get something that is new." After this there is a break in the correspondence until Thomson writes in March 1813 to beg that Scott will "take up your rapid and delightful pen, and hit off some sixteen or twenty lines," which, it seems, he had verbally promised to supply if Thomson would "wait till after Christmas." The following letter, dated February 1814, probably refers to the lines in question:

I beg pardon for not returning the proof, which had really escaped my remembrance. I beg you will erase the verse you dislike; indeed I think the only improvement possible would be to erase the whole, being sad trash, and a little out of date into the bargain.

When Scott writes next, in December 1814, it is about the Burns commemoration, regarding which something has been said in the Life:

I will attend the commemoration with pleasure if I am not screwed to the chair by a rheumatic complaint which has annoyed me all this winter. I cannot possibly think of taking the chair, having been long a stranger to everything like the conducting public festivity, and feeling besides that it would have to some the appearance of conceit, and of coupling myself more nearly with the bard than I have the modesty to attempt. I think the person who should be called to the chair is decidedly Auchinleck. His talents for the situation are most uncommon, his connection with Burns evident,<sup>1</sup> and as a man of fashion and consequence his name will form a guarantee for the respectability of the meeting, whereas

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<sup>1</sup> One of Sir Alexander's achievements was the erection of the Burns monument on the banks of the Doon.

I am so completely retired from everything approaching to general society that I do not know above four or five of my friends who are likely to attend. Even at a meeting of the Speculative Society which I attended on Saturday I found myself in the midst of strangers.

I am sorry the benefit<sup>1</sup> turned out so ill, but must relieve Siddons of the blame. He offered Wednesday, but the night happened to be unsuitable to several ladies who proposed to take boxes, to accommodate whom it was changed to Tuesday, and the change, with the time necessary for numerous explanations, &c. &c. &c., run us too short for advertising. I am glad to hear there is some chance of a monument in Edinburgh. A handsome obelisque in Charlotte's or St Andrew's Square would have a very happy effect.

By the way, the failure of Burns' play is a sufficient warning to me how little personal influence I can reckon upon in Edinburgh Society, for I have scarce a friend alive whom I did not assail on the occasion. Taking it for granted it will be agreeable for you, I will send your advertisement to Mr. Boswell, and beg him to let you know what he will do for us. . . .

*P.S.*—Since writing the above I have seen Mr. Boswell, and I find there is every prospect of his being in the country at the time proposed. If not, he will attend like myself as an individual, but cannot accept of office.

There is no further letter from Scott until 1818, but in September 1816 Thomson writes to him asking words for a Tyrolese melody, and for the air "known by the respectable appellation of 'The

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<sup>1</sup> The "benefit" was given on the 13th for the subscription for raising a national monument to the memory of "Mr. Robert Burns." A sum of £39, 14s. was realised.



Highland Watch,''' with which Hogg had already experimented. He goes on :

In the hope of your kindly consenting to this request, I have got a picture painted purposely for you, such as I think not unworthy of your acceptance, and which I take the liberty to send along with this, trusting that it will be agreeable to you, for I cannot allow myself to intrude upon your precious time without offering an apology more substantial than mere words.

Scott's next letter, dated 9th March 1818, has a passing reference to the serious illness with which he was first visited in 1817. The "long-delayed verses" were his "Sunset" and his "Farewell to the Muse," the latter printed by Thomson with an intimation that it was "written during illness":

I send you the long-delayed verses to the measure you pointed out. They have been, in truth, written for months, but I hoped always to find some subject which should smell less of the apoplexy, to use Gil Blas' metaphor. I had a sincere belief they were the last lines I should ever write, and I am still of the same opinion as to any poem of length. . . . I keep "The Maid of Isla" that I may hear it played over, and I will send you some words to it if I then like it. It has some local associations, which always makes the task light to me.

As a matter of fact Scott sent "The Maid of Isla" either with this letter or immediately after it. Thomson writes two days later :

No words of mine can express the gratitude and delight with which I received the three songs you have most obligingly written for me. They prove that your



fancy is still in the vigour of youth, and earnestly do I hope and pray that it may long, very long, continue so, for your own sake, that of your family, and that of the public. Each of the pieces is of a character quite distinct from the other, and each is most lively in its kind. "The Maid of Isla," as a *song*, may be considered the best of the three, and, indeed, is in every feature a perfect beauty.

These were the last contributions that Thomson was to receive from Scott. He tried him again in 1821 for a "Jacobitish ballad" to the old Lowland air, "The deuks dang ower my daddie,"<sup>1</sup> sending at the same time "a suit of our Scottish damask as a small vindication on my part." But the following letter, dated November 1821, was the only result. Scott had found another and a more profitable field than poetry.

I have hung my harp on the willows for ever and a day, and though I feel the most unfeigned reluctance to decline any request of yours, yet I should do you injustice by undertaking what I cannot do either well or easily. Permit me therefore to return your compliment. . . . I am sure I make you most heartily welcome, so far as I am concerned, to all or any of the verses of which I have been guilty.

This is the last extant communication of Scott to Thomson. The latter at once proceeded, through James Ballantyne, to ask Constable and Cadell

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<sup>1</sup> Thomson afterwards set Scott's "Norah's Vow" to this air. "I cannot deny myself the pleasure of uniting 'Norah's Vow' to that very pretty air, for I have sung them together till I am in raptures with them."—*G. T. to Scott, November 1821.*

for permission to use five songs from Sir Walter's miscellaneous poems, and the permission was readily granted. When he next writes to Scott it is in July 1822, and in the third person :

Mr. Thomson's most respectful compliments to Sir Walter Scott, and begs his acceptance of the three first volumes of Mr. Thomson's new collection of Scottish melodies and songs. He is enriching it by as many of Sir Walter's lyrics as he can find suitable airs for, agreeably to Sir Walter's kind permission, having also obtained the concurrence of Constable & Co. There is nothing that gives Mr. Thomson greater pleasure than marrying music to immortal verse.

Scott wrote altogether eleven songs specially for Thomson's various publications ; of course a number of others were used "by permission." In December 1820, when Thomson was likely to suffer from infringements of his copyrights, he sent for Scott's signature a form of assignment for these. In answer to that, Scott wrote :

I have copied out and enclose the assignment, with the variation that I and my assigns retain the power of publishing these songs in complete collections of my own poetical works, as they have hitherto been inserted on such conditions and could not be left out of future editions without rendering them less perfect. This will not, I apprehend, in the least interfere with the profitable exercise of your right, but may rather aid it as your musical collection is always referred to. . . .

I hereby certify that eleven of the songs published by Mr. George Thomson of Edinburgh, vizt. four in the fifth volume of his Scottish collection, pages 209, 215, 217, 228, two in the first volume of his Welsh songs, p. 6 and 25,

and two in vol. iii., Nos. 62 and 73, and three in the first collection of his Irish songs, p. 1, 11, each bearing my name, were written by me for these works, and are hereby declared to be the sole and exclusive property of the said George Thomson for all time coming. Reserving only to myself and assigns the right of publishing them in complete collected editions of my poems, but on no account in any other form. In testimony whereof I have written and subscribed these presents at Edinburgh this nineteenth day of December One thousand Eight hundred and twenty.—WALTER SCOTT.

The only other letter of Thomson to Scott is that of July 1828, already referred to (see page 81), asking an inscription for the Flaxman statue of Burns. The following letter of Scott bears no date, but is numbered by Thomson with those of the year 1814. Gilbert Burns had applied to Thomson to use his influence in procuring a situation for his son, and Thomson had sought to enlist the aid of Scott :

I enclose Mr. Burns' interesting letter, which of itself forms an apology for not recommending his son to a situation requiring a bold active pushing disposition. The directors look a good deal to their proposed manager for activity in getting orders as well as in collecting their dues, and I do not think the situation like to have suited a young man of a modest and retiring character. The profits depend on a percentage, and are not on the whole such (at least at present) as would render it advisable to forsake a certainty, though moderate. I would otherwise have been happy to have served a friend of yours, or above all a nephew of R. Burns, with any influence I might have in the matter.

## JAMES HOGG

In the spring of 1815 the Ettrick Shepherd had entered on his tenancy of the farm of Altrive Lake, with a country girl for housekeeper. Two years before, he had suddenly become famous by his *Queen's Wake*; but glory in his case did not lead to guineas, and as even genius must dine and dress, he turned his thoughts once more from Edinburgh to his native Ettrick. It is at this stage of the poet's history that our correspondence opens. Of course Thomson and Hogg would be bosom cronies during the time that Hogg was unsuccessfully playing the part of man of letters in the capital.

There is no copy of Thomson's first letter to the tenant of Altrive Lake, but the letter to be quoted presently was no doubt in answer to it. The Shepherd, it will be observed, did not think very highly of his own capabilities as a song-writer, in which capacity nevertheless, and in no other, he seems destined to survive. The song "on the next page" is the first form of "Could this ill world," the theme of which, according to the poet's daughter and biographer, Mrs. Garden, was the future Mrs. Hogg. The verses have no particular merit; yet Thomson found them "better and better" the oftener he read them, and declared that they would do the writer "everlasting credit." Alas! of how many now-forgotten productions

did the sanguine editor say the same! Hogg writes :

There is nothing that is in my power to accomplish but I will not [*sic*] cheerfully contribute to your miscellany, for besides the esteem which I bear you as a friend and a gentleman, I think your unwearied exertions in rescuing our national airs and songs from oblivion entitle you to the support of every Scottish bard. I am sorry that song-writing is not so much my *forte* as one would think it should be, but that which lies within my sphere I can accomplish with the utmost facility, and such are perfectly at your service. But that is not all which I wish to do. I have now collected about twenty ancient border airs which have never yet been published, and which but for me would have been lost to all intents and purposes. Some of these are perfectly beautiful, and may well have a place beside "Cowden Knowes" and "Gala Water." I should like to write words to some of these, and by all means I wish the airs were in your hands or [in the hands of] some gentleman who would make something of them, for if I should die before I see you, these precious relics would infallibly be lost. The song you desire is on the next page. If it were possible to sing "Delvin side," which I somewhat suspect, it would answer it. Adieu, my dear Thomson. Compliments to all friends. I spent a most pleasant day with Scott at Abbotsford on Monday last, and I am to meet him again at Bow Hill, where we are engaged to dine with his Grace on Monday next.

Thomson received this letter "amidst the bustle of the [musical] festival, while enraptured by the concord of sweet sounds, such as never were before heard on this side the Tweed." It seemed, as he tells Hogg on the 9th of November following, "a



foretaste of heaven"; and in order that the poet may learn what it was like, he is sending him a copy of the *Courant* with "a very well written account by our friend Ballantyne, assisted by the minstrel of Kelso, the hindmost fling of whose left heel amused you so much." Having thus disburdened himself, Thomson proceeds in "far more humble and simple strains." In other words, he tells Hogg what he must do for him in the way of song-writing. First he wants words for "The Highland Watch," an air "well worthy of the poet's favour." Then there is "the air which you have frequently heard from our friend Robert Miller to Jacobite words, which, though laughable enough at the first hearing, will not bear examination, nor suit my collection." This, it may be remarked in passing, was Thomson's opinion of—

Leeze me on the kilted clans,  
Bonny laddie, Highland laddie.

He would, however, have Hogg retain the "Bonny laddie, Highland laddie" refrain, and Hogg did as he was told. "The Haughs o' Cromdale" must also be furnished with new verses. The old story was founded on error, and besides, "if we are to sing of battles, Waterloo is worth ten thousand Cromdales." And lastly there is the air of "Widow, are you waking?" the words of which are of such a character that "any man attempting to sing them in the presence of ladies would probably be turned out of the room."



This was a pretty large order, but Hogg was always equal to at least an attempt at satisfying his correspondent. What precisely he did in answer to the letter does not immediately appear, for the correspondence is now broken until Thomson resumes it in November 1817. The opening part of his letter refers to the difficulty which the Shepherd was to encounter with the Highland Society of London—a difficulty mentioned in subsequent letters by Hogg himself. The matter is connected with the *Jacobite Relics*, which, as he explains in the preface, Hogg had collected at the suggestion of the Highland Society, made through Colonel Stuart of Garth. Stuart, as it would seem, had, apparently without the Society's official sanction, promised £100 for the collection.

"The very day," says Thomson, "of my receiving yours, which I thought quite to the purpose, I despatched it to Colonel Stuart with a few lines expressing my hope that he and the other members of the Highland Society will think such services as yours cheaply purchased by the sum you demand." In this letter Thomson, evidently forgetting that he had done so two years before, encloses the air "The Highland Watch," with a request for new words. Hence the following from Hogg. The idea of "dashing" a song "down on the slate" while the messenger waits is distinctly good, and shows that Hogg did not boast without good reason of his "utmost facility." The production thus hurriedly called into being was "Old Scotia! wake thy mountain strain," which Thom-

son published in the fifth volume of his royal octavo edition. Hogg, writing on November 29, 1817, says:

The devil's in it if I did not send you a song for that tune nearly two years ago, for I see I have the music by me in your hand. I think it was a good song too, but if you have it not, "like the bubble on the fountain, it is gone and for ever." A carrier from Selkirk put your letter into my hand this day, and as I very seldom have an opportunity of communicating with the post this season I have dashed a song down on the slate while he is engaged at his dinner, which I will copy on the other page and send to you. It being so completely off-hand I have not the least guess whether it is good or bad, but if it does not please I can easily make you another. You may take any of the choruses or all if you choose and amalgamate them into one. I have laughed immoderately at one part of yours.<sup>1</sup> You should take very good care, my dear George, how you mention such anonymous things in a magazine, and to whom [*sic*] you could not possibly have been more unfortunate in your remarks.<sup>2</sup> I have a great deal that I wish to say to you, but I have neither time nor space. God bless you.

Thomson must have found the song sent to him "nearly two years ago," for Hogg's next letter is merely a postscript to an altered version

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<sup>1</sup> There is no clue to the meaning of this in the copy of Thomson's letter, in which there is certainly nothing to laugh at, immoderately or otherwise. Possibly it was a postscript, which, not being "business," our business-like editor did not think it worth while to copy.

<sup>2</sup> Can this refer to the famous *Chaldee Manuscript* which appeared in the October *Blackwood*? Hogg said afterwards: "I am not certain but that I confessed the matter to Mr. George Thomson in the course of our correspondence before I was aware of its importance." See next letter.

of "Old Scotia" in Thomson's handwriting. The poet says :

I send you a corrected copy of the song which came to my hand this day from Yarrow. Send me a card saying if it will do. I think it devilish clever and spirited now when I see it again. It seems that I have uttered with my lips words that are inadvised, of which I knew not the import till I came here, but as only other two in the world know or even suspect, I beg for the sake of my future happiness that it may go with you to the place of all living. The continuation would make you burst your sides. I will give any man a copy who will swear secrecy for £100. I return to Yarrow this week, and have little chance to see you. Any word further from Col. Stuart?

The next letter is also from Hogg. It is dated 17th March 1818, and accompanies his version of "Highland Laddie" ("Where got ye that siller moon"?), regarding which he says: "I wrote a few English verses first to-day, which were quite an anomaly, the 'burden' being so decidedly Scotch. I like the above better, which I send." Thomson replies on the following day (Hogg was in Edinburgh at this time). He says:

Your "Highland Laddie," my dear sir, is an admirable fellow, and I shall have great pleasure in introducing him to the public. In the second stanza you have mentioned "Bony" and Blucher very happily, but would it not seem rather awkward to leave out the greatest warrior of the three? You must surely hitch the *Duke* into the beginning of the third stanza, just after Blucher: I do not mean for any laboured eulogy, but merely in the same easy, *en passant* way with the other two. . . .

Now, my good friend, I cannot content myself with barely thanking you for these excellent songs of yours which are to grace my fifth volume. I observed the other day that you have but the small edition of Johnson's Dictionary without the illustrations or examples, which last appear to me a sort of necessary of life to a literary man, and especially to a poet. Do me the pleasure, then, to accept of the quarto edition herewith sent, as a mark of my gratitude and esteem.

Thomson then goes on to show how "the Duke" may be introduced, and to suggest other alterations on the song. Hogg, at any rate, did not object to Thomson's tinkering—nay, he apparently rejoiced in being able to command the services of so experienced a mender. Witness the following letter, of March 25, 1818:

I shall keep the valuable work you have been so kind as to send me this morning as a memorial of friendship, but I want your name on the title-page. I confess however that I felt a little distressed at receiving it, for I have always valued your friendship and kind attentions so much that nothing gave me greater pleasure than any little chance that occurred of obliging you, not only as my own particular friend, but as the bard's friend and the friend of merit in general, and one on whose experience and good taste I have so perfect a reliance that I find it always out of my power to oppose any amendment hinted at. I am very jealous of any appearance of interest in my friendships. Therefore in future let it always be understood that the more you require of me in my line the more you scold me when I do not do it to your mind, and the fewer acknowledgments the better. As this song ["Highland Laddie"] is in fact a ballad and no great length, I have added two stanzas

to-day in order to make it run somewhat smoother, but I will be happy to correspond with you on it any day before Tuesday next, when I leave town for a little. I have not been able to find a better word than "fleering," but I think, should *your* "burden" be adopted, "jeering" should be first, for the sake of the first line of the answer. As the Highlander, however, treats the other with a good deal of contempt throughout, I have been trying the song, and I think "Waefu' body, Lawland body," would have rather a good and comic effect in singing it. Pray try it and tell me. I have no copy of the song nor of the other either. I send you always the off-hand copies, and trust to your suggestions for the correcting of them. Grieve<sup>1</sup> assured me you would alter the broken Highland Scotch. I thought so too, but what I had written I had written.

Again there is a break of three years in the correspondence. When it is resumed, Thomson writes—on the 30th of November 1821—asking Hogg's permission to use his "Lament of Flora Macdonald," which had appeared in the second series of the *Jacobite Relics*. This produced the following reply, dated December 14:

I received your letter with the music and Margaret's [Mrs. Hogg's] fine tablecloth, for which she is much beholden to your kind remembrance. For my part I am always grieved when you send me any costly presents, because you are a friend whom I would always like to oblige, but you will not let me. I would have answered your letter off-hand, but I meant to have sent a rough draft of some of the songs you want. I have

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<sup>1</sup> No doubt Mr. John Grieve, of Cakra Bank, Ettrick, who was a hatter in Edinburgh. It was Grieve who suggested the writing of *The Queen's Wake*.



been trying one, but it does not please me, not being nearly so good as "Donald Macdonald" to the same tune, "Woo'd and married and a'." Besides, I am not sure of the propriety of making a Highland gathering song to a Lowland air. I shall do my best for all the songs that you want, and as many more as you want. You are as welcome to all that is mine of "Flora Macdonald's Farewell" as I can make you. Only I must apprise you that young Mr Gow picked the tune as well as a set of old words perfectly hateful as well as shockingly indelicate. I liked the air and wrote the present words for it, keeping the sentiments of the old song in view, and gave him the verses to publish, which he did in a sheet of his own and for his own behoof, so that Mr. Niel Gow may claim, if he pleases, the whole as his own. You know how little I value a string of rhymes, and from the time I gave the manuscript out of my pocket he and I have never once mentioned the song more. I know you would not like to ask his liberty to publish it, and since you are fallen in conceit with it, my own opinion is that you should just publish it, adding the note at the bottom that occurs concerning it in the *Relics*, and that you have my liberty for publishing it, and then, if Niel should turn cross about it, he can only scold me a little, and he knows I do not mind such things much. All the other songs of mine either printed or unprinted, engraved or stereotyped, are at your service. I have written a new trifle that I like to hear sung exceedingly to the tune of "The Bladrie o't," to which I have subjoined a second part to suit my chorus. I wish you would publish it, for I think it will take. I don't like the first few lines, but I had no other ready.<sup>1</sup> Do not send me the fiddle,

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<sup>1</sup> The "new trifle" was "When the kye comes hame," which Thomson wedded to a totally different air from that now associated with the song. The "first few lines" which Hogg did not like,



my dear Thomson. Believe me, I have an excellent Cremona, eighty years old, and valued at £100. Don't send a German violin here to be utterly put out of countenance.<sup>1</sup> The secretary of the Highland Society refuses to pay me my £50. Colonel Stuart with all his goodness and kind intentions has misled me. I conceived I had as good a claim for that money as any I ever won in my life. The proffer was positive, but it seems it has been unauthorised. I think if the Society ultimately refuses [to endorse]<sup>2</sup> him it is a great disgrace.

The first result of this letter was a communication to "Mr. Neill Gow, Princes Street, Edinburgh." This particular "Neill" was not, of course, "the man who played the fiddle weel," as the old rhyme has it. He was a grandson of the famous Niel—a son of Nathaniel Gow, to whom Thomson had just written for permission to use his "Caller Herrin'." The junior Niel was a very promising musician, but was cut off in 1823, at the early age of twenty-eight.

On the 22nd of December (1821), then, Thomson writes to Niel asking if he will allow him to use

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and for which he afterwards substituted the present opening lines, were as follows :

Come rove with me, come love with me,  
And laugh at noble men,  
I'll tell ye of a secret rare  
That courtiers dinna ken.

<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Garden does not think that Thomson sent the fiddle. The only one she knew her father to possess was the above-mentioned "Cremona."

<sup>2</sup> The letter is wafered here. Other additions within brackets in subsequent letters are conjectural for the same reason.

"Flora Macdonald." He has printed the words, but it has just occurred to him that "as you have printed the song singly, you might perhaps take offence at my publishing it; if so, I shall, however reluctantly, cancel all the five hundred copies, notwithstanding my having printed the song from the *Relics* by the author's authority." Gow evidently did not care to give his permission without something of value in return; for we find Thomson writing to him on Christmas day to offer by way of exchange either a new version of "Charlie is my darling," or a version of "The bonnie house of Airlie," "much preferable to the ordinary ditty on that subject,"<sup>1</sup> with authority to publish either singly. Gow consented to the publication of the air—on what terms we do not learn, but apparently, from a reference in the next letter, he held out for his rights. On the 14th of February (1822) Hogg sends the following long letter:

I have been absent in the West country for five weeks, but have now returned to my duty, and have sent you

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<sup>1</sup> Thomson first published his version of this ballad "from a MS. transmitted to the editor in 1822." David Vedder was tried for another version. Writing to him in June 1831, Thomson says: "The last time I wrote you I submitted 'The bonnie house of Airlie' to you for a new song, long before that house made such a curious display of their political valour, so that your silence could have no reference to the House. But I presume you had such a good opinion of the song already in the work as to be disinclined from writing another. Another poetical friend, after trying his hand upon it, gave it up; I therefore became quite reconciled to the song as it stood, and have republished it without any cautioner." The version in Thomson's new edition was by Mrs. Grant.

two songs<sup>1</sup> not nearly so good as I could have wished, but I am plagued and disgusted with the measures you bind me to, which are neither hexameter, iambic, nor any measure that ever was heard of. Why in the world should you measure a modern song by the rude strains of a former age which no poetical ear can ever read, however they may suit for singing? I declare after I have them written I cannot read them over. In "Woo'd and married an a'," the lines in every verse vary from six to nine syllables. Surely it is an easy matter to adapt the air to words of a regular rhythm. Little as I know of music I always do this, and find them answer much better, as in "Donald Macdonald." The other ("My wife's a winsome wee thing") is worse; for though regular it is regularly wrong. Every line should have been eight syllables, and every verse has caused me to deprecate your taste. I cannot suffer my name to stand with verses of so [vexatious] irregularity and bad rhythm. If you therefore adopt the songs, please publish them simply as *Jacobite* songs, leaving the world to find out whether they are old or new. This has a far better effect than saying "*A Jacobite song by such and such an author.*" The very idea that perhaps they may be of a former day and written by some sennachie of the clan gives them double interest. I shall set about the others my first leisure day, but I am involved over head and ears in literary promises. I think Niel Gow has behaved in a very selfish, shabby way, and I cannot forgive him. If you would give me as good and as regular tunes as Flora, surely I can write as good songs. Colonel Stuart does me great injustice. I have made a collection which no man on earth could have made but myself, for Scott could not have collected the music. Besides, the Highland Society were not displeased with my work. I have obligations to the contrary, and I am sure there never

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<sup>1</sup> "What ails my heart?" and "The moon was a-waning."

was a fairer bargain made between two men on earth than mine for £100, which you know. I have a great mind to force him to implement his bargain, which I find he has made without authority. There is no reason why I should be gulled and cheated by everybody in this manner, after all the pains I have taken.

Thomson has set down no more than a summary of his next letter to Hogg, dated 5th March 1822. That summary may, however, be quoted :

Letter sent, acknowledging receipt of three songs of his writing, namely a Jacobite ballad called "The three men of Moriston"; another for the air called "The Wish," beginning "Heave O, upon the tide"; and a third called "The gathering of the Stewarts." Approving much of the first, but proposing to shorten it to seven stanzas, and some slight alterations. Remarking that the second, though possessing considerable merit, resembled Dibdin's "Tom Tough" too much, but would do if he could not let me have anything more original.<sup>1</sup> Disapproving entirely of "The Stewarts' gathering" intended for "My wife's a winsome wee thing."

Two months later, Lockhart was being asked to supply words for the last-named air, so that if any efforts were made by the Shepherd to patch up his song, they did not please Thomson's taste.

In the meantime we have the following brief note from Hogg, enclosing the song "Pull away, jolly boys":

I wrote the above song to the air you want eleven years ago. I therefore send you a copy with some

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<sup>1</sup> Words by Mrs. Grant were set to this air, so that Hogg's verses were rejected.

amendments, but if it do not please you I will send you another. I wrote one for "Rattling, roaring Willie"<sup>1</sup> last week, but I have mislaid it, and cannot get it to-day if I should die.

On the 16th of March (1822) Thomson has :

Wrote Mr. Hogg with his song of "The three men of Moriston" altered by me in order to suit the air of "Fy, let us a' to the wedding," begging him to consider the alterations and to return the song, revised by him, in its new shape. Approving of his song "Pull away" as finely suited for the intended air, but mentioning my dislike of "The Camerons' welcome hame."

Hogg's next letter is written on the back of the altered version, in Thomson's handwriting, of "The three men of Moriston." It is as follows :

At the first sight I was going to give up the ballad in utter despair, but have once more run slightly over it, leaving you the choice of the new or the old lines as you think meet. That you should disapprove of "Camerons' welcome" I am a little astonished, but not disappointed, as I am very anxious to publish it myself to the same air, and shall let you see it in a month.<sup>2</sup> I have not a copy, and do not recollect a line of it, but from the impressions I have I fear it is not in my way to write anything much better. Be sure to return me my copy or another of the same. . . . By-the-bye the name Jervis *will not do* in "The boat song." It is an anachronism as palpable as if he had sailed with Mark Antony and Cleopatra.

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<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Grant wrote words for this air "in summer 1803, when it was understood that a negotiation for bringing Mr. Pitt again into office had failed."

<sup>2</sup> The song, "O strike your harp, my Mary," was written to the Highland air called "Camerons' welcome hame."



On the 1st of May (1822), and again on the 18th, Thomson writes asking words for the air of "We're a' noddin'." "None of the words which have appeared with that air, either here or in London, are at all tolerable, and I would feel quite proud to be enabled by you to give it some genuine hilarity and spirit. If you will be the muse for a joyous and elegant song to the music, the various other ditties which the popularity of the melody has of late elicited will be a' nodding, and soon put to bed for ever." Hogg's reply to this letter is missing, but he must have declined to write for "We're a' noddin'," or his version was regarded as unsatisfactory, for on the 27th of May we find that Lockhart is being tried for words to the air. How many versifiers were applied to on its behalf I am not prepared to say; in the end the successful man was Allan Cunningham.

Hogg's next note is a brief one, dated August 15, 1829:

I have sold the copyright of "Cam' ye by Athole" to Mr. Purdie, so that I have not the power of granting what you should have been so welcome to. But if the hurry of the moors were over I promise to compose you both a better song and a better tune to it than "Prince Charlie."

The "hurry of the moors" (the 12th of August was always a great day with Hogg) had been over for some time, and still Thomson was without his promised song. And so the editor sends him the air of "My love she's but a lassie yet" to be matched



with words. He remarks: "The more light and playful your song is the more appropriate will it be to the music, and I should wish it of that delicate and graceful character which would render it acceptable to female hearers and singers." Thus was produced one of Hogg's best-known songs. In sending it, along with an alternative version, on October 23, 1829, Hogg writes:

You have fairly puzzled me, for the truth is that I find to make a graceful song to a triple rhyme is utterly impracticable. A double rhyme at the end of every line is bad enough, but still when the emphasis falls on the penultima it is *possible* to manage it; when it falls on the one before that, it is *not* possible. I received your letter with the carrier to-night, and for fear of forgetting a kind old friend I have written you down two songs for the air that you may take your choice of them. Neither are at all good, but I cannot help it, for I can make them no better. There is one of them, were it not that an admired young friend of mine might sing it sometimes who has let her enthusiasm in music supersede that in love, might as well be called "George Thomson's Annie." It is a shabby useless . . . . .<sup>1</sup> of a tune. I could have made you one ten times better, for which I appeal to Mr. Hogarth. When you write to me, whatever size the letter be you need not be at the pains to pay for it; only *double* direct always to me at Mr. Watson's, Candlemaker Row, and it will come free and quicker, for we have two carriers a week from thence and only one from Selkirk on Fridays. I will be in Edinburgh all the All-Hallow fair week, Mrs. Hogg and I, when I hope to see you.

<sup>1</sup> It is impossible to suggest with any certainty the wafer-covered words here.

This is the last letter from Hogg in the correspondence. "The poet very kind," Thomson has inscribed it. And kind he had certainly been from first to last.

## BYRON

Thomson's correspondence with Byron opened at a stage of the poet's career when his circumstances were hardly likely to allow him much time or inclination for the diversion of song-writing. Negotiating with creditors and lawyers about the repair of his "irreparable affairs," he was, as he declared, sick both of himself and of poetry; longing to say farewell to England and fly to the seclusion of "one of the fairest islands of the East." That Thomson did not succeed in drawing anything from the "noble author" need not therefore surprise us.

His first letter to the poet is dated July 10, 1812, a few months after the publication of *Childe Harold*, and is addressed to the care of Murray, then of Fleet Street. Thomson has certain melodies in his portfolio which are still unprovided with words, and if he can only prevail on his Lordship to "match them with congenial verses" he will be "the happiest of men." He approaches the poet with "the utmost diffidence," and can offer no better apology for his daring "than by declaring the truth, that it proceeds from my admiration of

the lyrics in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*." He goes on :

I am filled with apprehension that your Lordship may think me too bold in making my request. Indeed, my courage has repeatedly failed when I sat down with the intention of writing to you, but the solicitude I feel to obtain songs every way worthy of the music has at last overcome my scruples, and I venture to throw myself on your Lordship's liberality and goodness. I might perhaps have been able to procure a friendly recommendation to your Lordship, but I really thought, if you should not be inclined to write for the Muse's sake you would not care to write at all ; and much as I should regret it, I would rather that you rejected my suit than that you were obliged to reject that of a friend.

Along with the letter Thomson sends a copy of his collection, first "as a tribute to your Lordship for the exquisite pleasure I have had in perusing *Childe Harold*," and second in order to show the poet that his name would "not be discredited" by appearing in the work.

Byron answered this lackey-like letter through Murray, by whom Thomson was informed that the poet agreed to do something for his collection. On the 22nd of September Thomson accordingly sent Byron five Irish airs for which he desired verses, remarking that he would afterwards place a couple of Welsh melodies in his view, "if I am favoured with your permission." He adds, in his pedagogic way, pretty much as if he were instructing a tyro in verse :

I know not whether your Lordship happens to read music, but although you do not, it is in the present case

of very little or no consequence, because I have mentioned what appears to me the general character of each air. Still, I am sensible that the precise character of some airs is not easily defined, and therefore in writing verses for national melodies much latitude is allowed to the poet in choosing the subject or the character of his song. He is fettered only in the measure, which must precisely correspond with the examples. . . . I anticipate great pleasure from singing, or rather from my young female friends singing your Lordship's verses.

Thomson's anticipated pleasure was not to be realised. The first suggestion of a disappointment came to him from Murray. On the 28th of January 1813 he writes to the publisher, now of Albemarle Street :<sup>1</sup>

I received your very obliging letter of the 23rd inst. When I saw "Byron" upon the outside I tore open the frank with all the eagerness and impatience of a lover ; but what was my disappointment to find instead of the songs, that his Lordship now entertains some doubt whether he should write for the airs I sent, because Mr. Moore wrote verses for the same airs. I flatter myself that, on a very little consideration, his Lordship will not think that this should form any barrier to my wishes. Mr. Moore has furnished verses to Power for the very same airs for which the verses of Burns were previously written and printed in my work. With this I find no fault. Different songs can be perfectly well applied to the same air, and each give delight to the hearers. My work was announced to the public to be in preparation several years before Power thought of his Irish airs. He has no doubt taken the start of me with

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<sup>1</sup> "You are removing to Albemarle Street, I find, and I rejoice that we shall be nearer neighbours."—*Letter of Byron to Murray, October 23, 1812.*

respect to those airs while I was engaged in bringing out my Scottish and Welsh airs. Yet I am not in the least dismayed ; for though Mr. Moore's poetical contributions to Power's Irish airs are highly beautiful, yet the songs written for my works are by poets not less eminent ; while in the musical department my work will be found infinitely superior to anything of the kind existing.

The same objection to writing words to airs for which Moore had previously furnished verses was made later on by Professor Smyth of Cambridge. Thomson, however, urges upon Murray to apply again to Byron on his behalf ; and in case the poet still hesitates with regard to the airs already in his possession, he sends five melodies which have not appeared in Power's work. The next letter explains itself. It is addressed to Murray, and is dated September 2, 1813. Thomson writes :

On receipt of your very obliging letter in April, I ventured to address Lord Byron again, but having waited thus long not honoured with any reply, I fear that it will be in vain for me any longer to cherish the hope of his writing the songs for me, and that I must now apply elsewhere. If you are of opinion that I have a chance to get any of them, such is my anxiety that I would still wait ; but if you say that I am not likely to be gratified, I must just reconcile myself to the disappointment. *The Giaour* is an exquisite poem. I am glad to see that our Reviewer has given it the high praise it deserves.<sup>1</sup> I find beautiful verses in the *Hours of Idleness*. From that work and from *Childe Harold* I have selected three songs which I should be happy to set to music. I mean "Lochnagarr," par-

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<sup>1</sup> *The Giaour* was published in the preceding May. The *Edinburgh Review* had just printed a notice of the poem.



ticularly the first three stanzas (for as a *song* I think it were best to close with the line "They dwell in the tempests of dark Lochnagarr")<sup>1</sup>; "Oh, had my fate been joined with thine"; and "The kiss, dear maid, thy lip has left." May I presume to request the favour of your asking whether his Lordship will have the goodness to permit me to unite these songs with characteristic music, which I am sure will delight every hearer. Though it seems to be a general practice among music publishers to take songs from the works of poets without asking leave, yet I have never done so.

Thomson had not long to wait for an answer to the part of this letter which most concerned him. This time it is the poet himself who writes :

*September 10, 1813.*

MY DEAR SIR,—Mr. Murray informs me that you have again addressed him on the subject of some songs which I ought long ago to have contributed. The fact is I have repeatedly tried since you favoured me with your first letter, and your valuable musical present which accompanied it, without being able to satisfy myself. Judge, then, if I should be able to gratify you or others. A bad song would only disgrace beautiful music. I know that I could rhyme for you, but not produce anything worthy of your publication. It is not a species of writing which I undervalue. On the contrary, Burns in your country, and my friend Moore in this, have shown that even their splendid talents may acquire additional reputation from this exercise of their powers. You will not wonder that I decline writing after men whom it were difficult to imitate and impossible to equal. I wish you

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<sup>1</sup> Thomson, in printing the song, gives only the first, second, and last verses. He "has not room for the intermediate stanzas of the noble author."



every success, and I have only declined complying with your request because I would not impede your popularity. Believe me, your well-wisher and very obedient servant,

BYRON.

*P.S.*—You will not suspect me of caprice nor want of inclination. It is true, you may say, I have already made attempts apparently as hazardous ; but believe me I had again and again endeavoured to fulfil my promise without success. Nothing but my most decided conviction that both you and I would regret it could have prevented me from long ago contributing to your volume.

Byron, in short, could not write songs at will—"as you smoke tobacco." No doubt he had honestly tried to fulfil his promise to Thomson, but having missed the first spring—to use his own simile—he could only, like the tiger, go grumbling back to his jungle. But Thomson was not easily repulsed ; and in spite of this refusal, we find him going back to Byron again. On the 24th of August 1815 he wrote to him as "the most renowned living poet whom England can boast of" :

I would not, perhaps, have mustered courage enough to take the liberty of addressing your Lordship again on the subject of song, but for the recent proofs you have given to the world how pre-eminently you succeed in that species of poetry, the Hebrew songs being diamonds of the first water, of which I have not words to express my admiration.<sup>1</sup> Let me earnestly beseech your Lord-

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<sup>1</sup> The *Hebrew Melodies* were written in the previous year, and published with the music arranged by Braham & Nathan. In a letter of May 30, 1815, addressed to Professor Smyth, Thomson says : " My daughter has played and sung all the Hebrew melodies to me more than once. I think very little of the music. With the exception of one or two melodies they do not appear to me at all worthy of

ship to think of a few stanzas for the three Welsh melodies which I venture to enclose, with the accompaniments of Beethoven. If sung and played to you by Lady Byron, or any of your lady friends, I am sure you must be highly pleased with the music.

Whether Byron was "highly pleased" or not we have no means of knowing. Thomson had pounced upon him at another unfortunate period, and the correspondence now came to an end on both sides. Some months before this—in April 1815—Murray wrote to Hogg, who was also pestering Byron, that he must "make large allowances" for such a man. "Newly married, consider the entire alteration which it has occasioned in his habits and occupations, and the flood of distracting engagements and duties of all kinds which have attended it." In November Byron had to sell his library, and there were nine executions in his house within the year. How could Thomson expect "such a man" to give any attention to his little requests?

## MOORE

In Thomson's letter-books a draft communication to Moore appears among the letters of August 1803, but Thomson has marked this "not sent." As a

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Byron's verses. To some of the melodies, indeed, it is scarcely practicable to sing the words with any effect whatever. The latter do not seem to have the least affinity with the former, and their union confounds measure, rhythm, sense, and everything belonging to a good song. In short, Jew and Christian could not possibly agree worse. 'Jephtha's Daughter,' however, is charming, and to my taste worth all the rest."

matter of fact, he did not write to the poet until May 1805, when he applied to him for words to a trio of Welsh airs. He begins in his usual apologetic style, and with the inevitable compliment :

I am going to take a liberty for which I do not know how to apologise, except by declaring the truth, that it is in consequence of the very great delight I have received from the perusal of your lyric compositions, which are so exquisitely beautiful as to be far beyond any panegyric I could bestow on them. Your musical talents, too, strengthen my inducement to the application I am about to make, and it is my firm persuasion that there is scarcely a person in the kingdom to whom I could with so much propriety urge my request. . . . I am truly happy to see that we are very soon to be gratified with a new volume of your lyrics. I look for them with impatience.

To this letter Moore replies on the 16th of July as follows, writing from Donington Park :

I feel very much flattered by the application with which you have honoured me, and the idea of being associated in any way with Haydn is too tempting to my vanity to be easily resisted. At present, however, I am so strictly pledged not to divert one moment from the poems I am engaged on, that I fear if you require the songs immediately I can hardly bestow on them all the attention I should wish. But if your publication is not very urgent I know of nothing that would give me more [genuine]<sup>1</sup> pleasure than to contribute the humble efforts of which I am capable to a work so elegant and interesting as that which you are employed on. Pray,

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<sup>1</sup> Word torn away here by the seal.

let me know the *longest* time you can afford me, and I shall then be able to answer you more satisfactorily on the subject.

I have tried the airs you were so good as to send, and like the two first extremely; the last, to my taste, is not near so pretty, but perhaps it will improve on repetition.

The cordiality with which you praise the young trifles I have published is of course very grateful to me, far as I am from agreeing with you in the opinion you so flatteringly express of them.

Thomson no doubt replied to this letter, but there is nothing further in his correspondence until June 1806. He then writes to the poet reminding him of his letter of the previous summer, and expressing the hope that now his "elegant and delightful volume is before the public," he will fulfil his promise. Some little time before this he had sent Moore a copy of his *Scottish collection*. The poet had just published his *Epistles, Odes, and Poems*, and in his next letter, as will be seen, he shows some anxiety to learn what the *Edinburgh Review* has said of them. Jeffrey, as everybody knows, wrote a hostile notice of the book, condemning its immoral tendency—a notice which eventually led to that "meeting" between author and critic, when the officers of Bow Street, acting on the information of one of Moore's friends, interfered before a shot had been fired, and found that there was no bullet in Jeffrey's pistol. Byron satirically referred to the bloodless duel in the *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, and then Moore sent a challenge to *him*! Certain references in the next and follow-

ing letters are thus explained. On the 16th of July (1806) Moore writes from St. James's :

I feel quite ashamed at my not having, long before this, acknowledged the kindness of your very elegant present. I was already well acquainted with the work, but did not possess it among my collection.

I have been so unfortunate as to lose the airs which you sent me to Donington Park, and I need not tell you how very imperfectly one could expect to write words upon the mere skeleton of metre which you have given me, without knowing and feeling the spirit of the music to which they are to be wedded. It would be like those distant, diplomatic courtships to which poor princes and princesses are doomed. Have the goodness to let me see copies of the airs again, and I shall endeavour to put the best of my humble powers in requisition for them.

You may send them under cover to Mr. Stokes (without directing them to me), and let that be again in another envelope directed to William Fawkener, Esq., Whitehall. And now I shall beg of you to do me a favour through the same channel. The *Edinburgh Review* will be published by the time you receive this, and if you will immediately forward me a copy of it under the covers I have mentioned, you will do me a kindness which I shall feel very grateful for. I am obliged to leave London for Ireland about the latter end of next week, and wish to see what your Tribunal says of me before I go.

I have not time to read what I have written, but hope you will be able to make it out.

Thomson sent him fresh copies of the airs, with which, as will be seen, he was not greatly charmed. The "particularly flippant and uninteresting" air was "The Lamb's Fold," a *vivace* melody, which had been set by Haydn for two voices. When he



next writes to Thomson, Moore has "received the *Review*." In his "Particulars of my hostile meeting with Mr. Jeffrey in the year 1806" he says that the "tribunal" did not reach him in London, "for I have a clear recollection of having for the first time read the formidable article in my bed one morning at the inn in Worthing where I had taken up my sleeping quarters during my short visit to the Donegals." There is a delightful ingenuousness in his manner of intimating a probable visit to Edinburgh, and still more in his guileless reference to Jeffrey, whom he contemplated killing, as "one of the persons mentioned in the *Review*." Unluckily for Thomson and the Edinburgh police, Moore had to reach London from Worthing before sending his challenge to the insignificant "person," and meanwhile the "identical Jeffrey himself" came to the metropolis. The following letter is dated from 27 Bury Street, St. James's, in August:

I received the airs which you sent me, and shall have much pleasure in writing words to them, though I confess I could have wished you had selected some [more attractive]<sup>1</sup> melodies for me. The last air of the three appears to me particularly flippant and uninteresting. I must say, however, that as yet I have played them but once, so that perhaps I may like them better when I have become more intimate with them. I have received the *Review*, and cannot tell at present whether I am indebted to you for sending it, as it was forwarded to me to the country, and I have not asked my bookseller whether it was a copy enclosed by you, or the one which he sends

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<sup>1</sup> Part of letter torn away by the seal.



me regularly. If I am in your debt, however, I have some hopes of being able to repay you in person, as I think it is likely I shall soon visit Edinburgh. I was agreeably disappointed by the article on my volume of Poems. There is all the malignity which I expected, but not half the sting; and I hope I shall always be lucky enough to have such dull prosing antagonists. Will it be too much trouble for you to answer me a question by return of post? Does Mr. Jeffrey (one of the persons mentioned in the *Review*) reside in Edinburgh; and is he there at present? You see I make you pay very dear for the nonsense which I intend to write to your music, but I trust you will excuse the liberty which I take.

It must be admitted that Thomson's patience was sorely tried by the procrastination of his poets. Like Byron, they all seemed to "pall in resolution." Moore was certainly no exception. Thomson waited exactly two years from the date of the above letter, and still he was without the promised verses. Of course there was now very good reason why Moore should not care to give his assistance to the Edinburgh editor. He had (in 1807) begun his *Irish Melodies* in conjunction with Sir John Stevenson; and for each of his songs in this collection he was being paid, and continued to be paid, a hundred guineas.<sup>1</sup> Thomson obviously could not compete with such terms, and so he had to give up Moore, as he had later on to give up Byron. On the 14th August 1808 he writes again, the press being actually kept waiting for "the songs that you undertook to favour me with." The press might have

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<sup>1</sup> The publication went on till 1834, when Moore had drawn from it £12,810, or at the rate of £500 a year.

waited till the Greek Kalends ; and Thomson at last understood that he must look elsewhere. The very next letter in his letter-book is to Mrs. Hunter, entreating her "compassion" on the destitute airs. "He never fulfilled his repeated promise"—such is Thomson's eloquent comment on a little slip which he has tied up with the Moore letters.

The first volume of the Welsh collection was published in 1809 ; and in the meantime Thomson, as already indicated, had been anticipated by Moore in the matter of an Irish collection. In a letter to Mrs. Opie, undated, but belonging to the autumn of 1809, Thomson says :

I participate in your admiration of Moore's songs, in which there is much feeling, taste, elegance, and poetic spirit ; and he has a happy talent for blending Anacreontic and amatory sentiments in his songs which, when chastely coloured,<sup>1</sup> give a peculiar charm to this species of composition. When I saw Mr. Moore enter the field I was disposed to retire and leave him in quiet possession of it ; but having collected my materials long before he made his appearance, and got some of the Irish airs admirably harmonised by Haydn, &c., five years ago, I must either go on or lose all the expense I have already incurred. In my accompaniments I shall be decidedly superior, and I will make every effort in my power to obtain songs worthy of the music. I think highly of *your* powers ; you can, I have no doubt, produce songs that Moore himself would be proud to own.

Thomson, as indeed we have already learned, prided himself greatly on this alleged superiority of

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<sup>1</sup> "The colouring, if you please, not too warm": this is Thomson's instruction to Moore when first asking verses from him.

his Irish collection to that of Moore. In a letter written on February 14 to William Smyth he says that "though Mr. Moore's songs (where they are not too voluptuous) are in general highly beautiful, yet in the *musical* department my work will be found incomparably superior. Hear any of the melodies with the meagre commonplace symphonies and accompaniments of Sir John Stevenson, and then with those of the admirable and original Beethoven, and you will find that it is by no means the same tale twice told, but one infinitely more interesting and elegant to every person having any portion of taste for music."

All the same, it was matter of much regret to Thomson that he had been unable to secure the services of Moore for himself. "The Irish," he said in 1809, "are famed for their pleasantry and humour, but it is no easy matter to find an original poet among them. We hear of none except Moore." Thomson certainly made no discoveries in that direction.

### THOMAS CAMPBELL

Campbell, according to Thomson, was "glorious" at song-writing; therefore the disappointment was all the greater at not getting original songs from his pen. The correspondence is in this case practically all on one side; for while in Thomson's letter-books there are copies of six letters to the poet, there are but two letters from the latter extant. The loss, of course, is not likely to be

great, for as Lockhart acutely said, Campbell's genius "seldom animates the page that was meant for a private eye."

Thomson first writes on the 31st of August 1803, when he asks "from your muse of fire" verses for three or four of his Welsh airs. The application produced a promise, but nothing more. Campbell in fact had the same excuse that Murray made for Byron: he had taken a wife. He tells his correspondent all about it in the following letter of September 29, 1803:

I am obliged to use the same apology for this late answer to your agreeable letter of last month as the worldly man made for not becoming a disciple—"I have married a wife!" &c. The Aurelian insect has not more ado to poke his little antennæ and forepaws out of the shell, in order to gain his new state of existence, than a poor bachelor has to get out of his celibacy, and flutter about in his wedding suit. The one bursts into light and liberty, but the other!—It is too soon, however, to moralise before the honeymoon is over.

By this time, as perhaps Richardson would inform you, I expected to have sojourned among you with my new-made namesake, but some affairs are yet to settle, and I cannot conveniently quit London for a few weeks. I wished to have expressed in person what the living and sincere tongue can more properly express than a feather and a drop of ink can do, the cordial interest I feel in your respectable publication and the pride and pleasure it would afford me to contribute to its success. But to write one verse, when the very mood does not happen to fall upon me, is, I assure you upon my honour, more than I can tax my muse withal. I know well that in saying so I run the risk—even with you, who possess the uncatholic quality of candour in a high degree—of

appearing to speak with affectation. But it is not so. I have twice or thrice in my life (perhaps a strait-laced critic would say more than twice or thrice, judging by many a bad line in my pieces) tried to write as a *duty*. I can only say of the verses I then wrote that they were not good—and in poetry there is no bearing the purgatorial state of mediocrity. . . . I have vowed never to write except when I can't help it. One power, however, is still left when we abjure writing as a duty, viz. that of guiding our imaginations, as far as they will be piloted, to the particular object we wish to adopt. I do not despair of feeling, at some happy moment, an enthusiasm in the Welsh air—which is indeed a fine strain—that may enable me to give you something worthy of your collection; but I cannot promise, with any confidence in my own accidental propensity to rhyme, any song that is yet unwritten; for if I sat *on purpose* to write a song, I am sure it would be vapid. . . .

Thomson waited for nearly two years, and then, on the 16th of August 1805, he wrote to the poet, now living at Sydenham Common, as follows:

I received a letter from you about two years ago, in which you was so good as to say that you would try at some future time to supply me with two or three songs for my collection of Welsh airs. As I do not know any living poet whose talents exceed yours (and in saying this, sure I do not flatter you) I cannot express the satisfaction I should feel if you would do me the favour to grace my work by writing songs for two airs only, and in slightly retouching your song "O Cherub content," to be joined to another of the airs. Your talents and time, I know, constitute your fortune, and therefore I would not accept of the productions which I am now soliciting without endeavouring to compensate



you for them. . . . Your admirable song, "The Exile of Erin," I think might be united to one of the Welsh airs in my possession. Will you permit me to unite it to the air if I find the match perfectly suitable? I am very glad to learn that your situation and prospects are comfortable, and that your literary labours are sweetened by domestic happiness.

Campbell, as may be seen from a letter to Scott printed in Beattie's *Life of the poet* (ii. 55), had some months before this conceived the idea of "a collection of genuine Irish music and translations from the Irish, adapted as words." The plan was now communicated to Thomson (by way of answer to the above letter, I presume), by whom it was favourably entertained, and through whom the songs were expected to find a sure introduction to popularity. In this enterprise, however, as Beattie tells us, the poet was again discouraged: the ground was already in the way of being occupied by Moore. Campbell therefore resolved to confine himself to a few popular ballads in continuation of those which had previously appeared with his name. But in this plan he was also defeated. In a letter to his friend Mr. John Richardson, the matter is thus referred to :

I troubled Grahame [of *The Sabbath*] with a commission—to apologise to Thomson for declining his proposal of sending him a few songs, both from my present indifferent health, and from a view of publishing some songs myself. I am now a little better, but I have laid aside for the present my view of publishing any songs, and must trouble you also with a commission to Mr. Thomson, saying that I shall be happy to attempt some



pieces that may suit his music, but that I cannot leave my present avocations<sup>1</sup> without material damage to my pecuniary profits. I am sorry to be obliged to bargain with one so much my friend, but my exertions are limited by indifferent health; my expenses are heavy; and numerous as my responsibilities are, my time would be lost in attempting to do anything unless I got such terms as Scott has got from Whyte.<sup>2</sup> If he can extend the commission to five or six songs, I can set seriously about the task; if he cannot, it would be a material damage to break my present avocations. You will say this, perhaps, in a more gainly way than I can write it.

Of course it was impossible for Thomson to pay Campbell the same terms as Scott was being paid, and the correspondence now suffers a break of something like seventeen years. When he next writes—or at any rate when his extant letters show him writing—it is in April 1822, when he regrets very much, “in common with all your old friends in this quarter, that you have so long ceased to appear on the field with the Byrons, Scotts, and Moores. It would,” he adds, “be quite refreshing and delightful to all poetical readers to see you resume your station among them.” Thomson’s letter on this occasion is mainly about Campbell’s well-known poem, “The Battle of the Baltic.” He says:

Conversing with our good friend James Ballantyne last night, on the subject of song, and expressing my

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<sup>1</sup> These were the *Annals*, Biographical Sketches, revision of his Poems, engagements with the *Star*, and Specimens of Scottish Poetry.—*Beattie's Note*.

<sup>2</sup> An Edinburgh music-seller, who published in 1806 *A Collection of Scotch Airs*, in 2 vols., edited by Haydn.

regret that I had not yet obtained a song worthy of a very fine air, page 181, vol. iv. of my printed collection, he surprised me greatly by telling me that he recollected your "Battle of the Baltic" being originally cast in the precise measure of that air; and he repeated the first stanza of it, which runs thus:

Of Nelson and the North  
Sing the day, sing the day,  
Of Nelson and the North  
Sing the day,  
When our haughty foe to vex,  
He engaged the Danish decks,  
And with twenty floating wrecks  
Crowned the fray.<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Ballantyne thinks that were he refreshing his memory by a careful perusal of the poem as printed in your works, he could nearly recollect the original form of the song, which was glorious and so admirably suited to the melody that both seemed to have emanated from the same creative power. Now, my good sir, you would confer an inexpressible obligation on me if you will have the kindness to write out the verses yourself and send them to me to be united with the melody, which is harmonised in the most masterly style by Haydn. I have got two or three songs for the music, but none of them satisfy me. Of yours I would be as proud as a courtier can be of a Star and Garter. Let me earnestly beseech you to gratify me.

It was scarcely likely that Campbell would allow Thomson to revive a version of "The Battle of the Baltic" which had long been buried as inferior. Thomson's literary judgment, as we have

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<sup>1</sup> Ballantyne's memory was at fault—at least this differs from the original draft which Campbell sent to Scott in 1805.—See *Beattie*, ii. 42.

seen, was often at fault, but it need not be imputed to him that he failed to recognise how incomparably finer the amended version of the poem was. The earlier form seemed to suit the air better, and on that point he was probably a sound critic. We cannot tell exactly what Campbell said to Thomson on the matter of his proposed return to the original version of the poem, but that he was decided on the point is clear from a remark in Thomson's next letter. "Of course," says Thomson, "I do not meddle with 'The Battle of the Baltic,' as I had proposed, since it is not agreeable to you."

Thomson was, in truth, somewhat unfortunate in the matter of Campbell's songs. "The Spectre Boat" had taken his fancy when it appeared in the *New Monthly*, and without consulting with the poet in the first instance, he marked it out for his own. Writing to Campbell in October 1822, he says:

I was exceedingly struck by your "Light rued false Ferdinand." It is one of the most lovely things I have ever read, and such a fine theme for music, that I put it into the view of Mr. Graham, an amateur of great genius, and a profound musician. He has set it, I think, with much felicity, and if you will get one of your intelligent musical friends to sing and play it to you, with the feeling and expression of which it is susceptible, I am sure you must be gratified by it. If so, and if you will have the goodness to permit me, I would be proud to insert it in my concluding volume now in the press. I have stopped at the press till you shall do me the favour of dropping a single line to me—Yes or no.

This request produced the following letter, written, it may be added, shortly after Campbell had suffered the agony of putting his eldest son under restraint. Beattie does not give it correctly.

LONDON,  
NO. 10 UPPER SEYMOUR STREET WEST,  
*November 12, 1822.*

MY DEAR SIR,—I beg leave to acknowledge the receipt of your elegant and tasteful volumes—to thank you for sending them, and to express my satisfaction at seeing my lyrics so well set in your work. It is at the same time, however, a disagreeable drawback on my pleasure to be obliged to acknowledge to you that I am not master of the copyright of the ballad entitled “The Spectre Boat,” or of any other which has hitherto appeared in the *New Monthly*. The copyright of these, that is the exclusive privilege to set them to music, has been a considerable time since disposed of to a publisher who has given them to composers to be set. I assure you I am very sorry that the appearance of “The Spectre Boat” in your collection is prevented by this circumstance. I have seen my friend Richardson since his arrival in town, and he seems much the better for his pilgrimage among his hospitable friends of the North. Mrs. Richardson, I lament to say, is still very unwell.

I remain, my dear Sir, with the greatest respect and regard, your very obliged friend,

T. CAMPBELL.

The only other letter addressed to Campbell was that in which he applied for an inscription for Flaxman’s statue of Burns, after he had been disappointed in his hope of securing one from Scott. In 1845, after the poet’s death, his friend Mr.

Richardson sent a communication to Thomson which produced the following :

I could not help being proud of what you tell me our lamented friend Tom Campbell was pleased to say of me as to my connection with Burns, in a letter which you received from him while he was at Munich in 1801, and which had lately come under your notice again when searching for all his letters in your keeping for the use of Dr. Beattie, now writing his biography. The very favourable report of me which you mention, by a man so eminent and known to have been so honest in his opinions as Campbell was, is truly a balm to my mind, wounded as it has lately so wantonly been by the rambling pen of Professor Wilson.

Campbell ought to have been a very good judge of Thomson's character. He became acquainted with him during his residence in Edinburgh, and no doubt the vexing Burns question was often discussed by the two men when they met.

### JOHN GIBSON LOCKHART

The correspondence with Scott's biographer is in so imperfect a state that it seems hardly worth touching it. While there are five letters written by Thomson to Lockhart, all in 1822, there are only two letters from Lockhart to Thomson, and both are dated June 1824. One or two little points of interest may, however, be gathered from the fragments. Thomson's first letter is dated March 25, 1822. He writes :

I lately happened to hear Mr. Hill<sup>1</sup> sing a song of your writing, which I so much admired that I would be happy to insert it in a new edition of my national songs now in the press, if you will have the goodness to permit me, and to send me a correct copy. From the ease, elegance, and spirit of the song, I am persuaded it would be a matter of no difficulty for you to indite other good songs; and as I have two or three fine old melodies that are very poorly matched with verse, I would be much gratified if you will be pleased to pen a few verses for each of them more worthy of the music.

Lockhart lost no time in replying to this, and next day Thomson writes to thank him for his courtesy in granting permission to use the coveted song, which, as we gather from this note, was that known as "The broad swords of old Scotland."<sup>2</sup> As to writing for the melodies Thomson proposed to send him, Lockhart, it appears, could not undertake the task "from his ignorance of music," and Thomson says he will not urge it. But he did urge it. On the 27th of May he writes:

Our friend Mr. Ballantyne says he is quite certain that you can indite very good songs, and with "The broad swords" before me I cannot entertain the least doubt of

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps Peter Hill, Creech's old clerk and one of Burns' correspondents.

<sup>2</sup> This song was written by Lockhart to be sung at the mess of the Midlothian Yeomanry, of which he was a member. Of the songs produced for these occasions a collection was printed for private circulation in 1825, under the title of *Songs of the Edinburgh Troop*. In this collection "The broad swords" bears date July 1821. Thomson, with a curiously perverted sense of the fitness of things, set the song to the tune of "The roast beef of old England." It is to be feared that he lacked the saving quality of humour.



it. I would fain persuade you, therefore, to do me the favour to try your hand upon one or two for melodies that are not provided with verses worth singing. In the hope that you may be induced to write for them, I take the liberty to enclose an example of the measure of verse required for "We're a' noddin'" and "My wife's a winsome wee thing." I presume that by means of the examples, and of my remarks concerning each of the melodies, you will be enabled to write for them without reference to the musical notation; but if after going over the enclosed you should wish to hear the music, I will call and sing it to you any morning that might suit your convenience.

In this way, as with Scott, did Thomson propose to get over Lockhart's ignorance of music. Whether he carried out his own suggestion does not appear. When he next writes, on June 19, about words for the troublesome melody of "Aikendrum," he sends a copy of the air "that Mrs. Lockhart may play it to you." Thomson, of course, found that Lockhart's Pegasus needed urging like the steeds of his other poets. On the 26th of August he writes to tell the future editor of the *Quarterly* that the press has been stopped some weeks for his promised songs for the melodies of "Aikendrum" and "We're a' noddin'." He continues:

Perhaps you might contrive to give a brief sketch of the splendid things we have lately witnessed<sup>1</sup> in a lyric and convivial shape. That would be interesting both to the present and future generations. This were greatly

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<sup>1</sup> This refers, no doubt, to the visit of George IV. to Edinburgh during August.

to be wished, and we have no tunes better calculated for table-songs than those before mentioned [*i.e.* "Nid noddin'" and "Aikendrum"].

Even this did not produce the promised verses, and Thomson finds it necessary to write once more—on the 3rd of March 1824. He really would not have troubled Lockhart again, but "the pleasure I have had in a recent perusal of some of your 'Spanish ballads' has revived my anxious wish to have your verses and your name placed among those of the tuneful bards who have given lasting celebrity to our native melodies."

At last, in June 1824, there is some response to the editor's many and urgent appeals. Lockhart then writes :

I send the two enclosed copies of verses, simply that you may see I *have* tried. I am quite sensible that they are bad, and in particular that the "Bessy Bell" is abominable, but I can do no better, on this occasion at least. If you should, for want of better, print any of these, I trust you will be careful not to mention my name as connected with it *to anybody whatever*. I have a feeling on this head which I cannot write about. But I hope you will get better elsewhere.

Lockhart was not really a song-writer, and he had the good sense to recognise the fact. As Mr. Lang remarks, his very nature forbade him to be a lyrist. He never took his poetic work seriously ; he rhymed for his pleasure only, and as he said himself, neither wished nor prayed for "fame poetic." Thomson, however, although in theory he believed

that the poet is born, in practice often did a good deal by his importunity towards the making of his singers. As usual he had to suggest alterations to Lockhart, hence the following note, written in the same month. Of course, it must always be remembered, when considering Thomson's suggestions and criticisms, that they very often sprung from a practical difficulty in fitting the words to the music. It is incredible that he should have thought "raging plague," with its irritating assonance, preferable on literary grounds to "pestilence," and the probable explanation of his suggestion is that the music required an accented or at least a prolonged syllable which the third syllable of "pestilence" did not provide.

Excuse my sending back, to save trouble, your own sheet.

I think it would spoil it entirely to alter the arrangement so far as leaving out the verse you object to (most justly) without giving a substitute. Perhaps this might do. It is at least simple :

They brought him all their best of cheer—  
Nor malvoisie nor sherries,  
But water that was cold and clear  
And wilding mountain-berries.

The alteration of "raging plague" for "pestilence" does not please me.

The illegible word is "Plague-spot," and it is partly on account of that word that I prefer "pestilence" in the other place.

This closes the Lockhart correspondence proper. But the name of Scott's biographer comes up after-

wards in connection with his Life of Burns, by which, as Thomson puts it, he "again brought into public view the genius, the virtues, and misfortunes of that highly gifted being." The Life was published early in 1828, and on the 19th of July Thomson yields to "an irresistible impulse" to state to his and the poet's old friend, Mr. John Syme of Ryedale, "what has occurred to me on reading this new Life." As this letter to Syme is inscribed "Another not much different to J. G. Lockhart, Esq., London," some quotations from it will be in place here. Thomson writes :

The volume appears to me to be ably written ; and though it cannot be said to contain much new matter, it presents to us a well-arranged detail of the poet's eventful life, a fair estimate of his manly character and extraordinary genius, illustrated by many judicious observations ; and what is to me—and I am sure will be to you and to all the warm admirers of the unfortunate bard—still more gratifying, Mr. Lockhart has repelled, by authentic and respectable testimonies, the exaggerated charges of dissipation and of gross impropriety of conduct which were said to have stained the latter years of the poet.

Thomson then goes on to remark upon the want of sympathy with the poet on the part of critics and reviewers. The *Edinburgh Review* in particular displeased him.

The critic seemed as if he had sat down to his ungracious task with a strong prejudice against the poet's private character, and with a sort of aristocratical feeling, as if the pride of the scholar could not brook the

elevated rank attained by the ploughman. He tells us that "the leading vice in Burns' character, and the cardinal deformity indeed of all his productions, was his contempt or affectation of contempt for prudence, decency, and regularity." He that could thus characterise the poetry of Burns had surely read it most superficially. If he had gone through it with attention, it seems impossible that he could have spoken of it in such terms. . . . If the critic meant his remark as applicable to the *letters* of Burns, and not to the poetry, he should have said so. Even the letters would not bear him out in his sweeping characterisation, for many of the poet's letters are undeniably excellent. . . . I think that Mr. Lockhart has done much towards correcting the false impression produced respecting Burns' character both by the *Edinburgh* and *Quarterly Reviews*.

Still, there were certain points about Lockhart's Life which, naturally enough, did not altogether satisfy Thomson. It was "unnecessary and not in good taste" for him to recur "so circumstantially to the frailties of Mrs. Burns with the poet in their antenuptial situation." Mrs. Burns had lived "an exemplary life of conjugal and parental affection"; her "uniform observance of moral, religious, and friendly duties" had "gained her the affection and esteem of all with whom she has been connected," and it was positively cruel of the biographer to "open up wounds which have been closed above thirty years, so likely to give pain to the lonely widow."

And then, of course, there was Lockhart's unlucky reference to Thomson's pecuniary relations with the poet. This matter has already been disposed of, but the following quotation from the

present letter to Syme (and to Lockhart) may be given by way of a final word :

There is an important fact which I daresay never occurred to the biographer, and it is this : that the poet's death unhappily took place before I had derived any benefit worth mentioning from his great liberality and kindness with regard to the songs—in fact before I had published above half a volume, or a tenth part of the work which I have since brought out. The work at large, though it had for some time an excellent sale, has, upon the whole, but scantily compensated me for my many outlays in various ways, both at home and abroad.

Lockhart must have replied to these criticisms of Thomson's. What a pity his reply is not in existence !

#### SIR ALEXANDER BOSWELL

Thomson had great belief in Boswell's powers as a song-writer. All along he experienced considerable difficulty in getting his lively airs matched. His versifiers, as he often complains, were ready enough to furnish him with "songs of the plaintive or tender kind," but he was "sadly perplexed to procure sprightly or cheerful ones." Sir Alexander was the man to whom, in these circumstances, he usually turned. Boswell has "a talent given to very few." There is "no son of the muses in either island able to match the lively airs with the felicity that runs through your humorous songs." There is "no single poet besides yourself who has genuine humour. . . . Coleman I thought might be suc-



cessful in songs of humour, and I offered him the most liberal terms<sup>1</sup> to write a few, but his time is so much occupied in writing for the stage that he declined undertaking any songs." On the other hand, Boswell himself was "not aware of having that command of this species of talent which you ascribe to me." But what of that? "I believe," he remarks in one letter, "I believe people in general don't care what the words are if they have words at all: anything will do to sing." This was assuredly not a very comforting theory for the editor who was giving his leisure hours to "procuring songs from the first poets of the day." Perhaps it explains why Boswell did not "quite like the name of the author to be stuck at the top in such tremendous letters."

Thomson's first extant letter to Boswell is dated August 23, 1803, in which year Boswell had published (anonymously) his first collection of verse. But the correspondence had begun two years before this. On the 17th of November 1801, Boswell writes from Auchinleck:

I have had the "East Nook o' Fife" copied, and some homely verses for the "Soger Laddie" ready to send you since before Ayr Races, but they were neglected and forgot. I have been so little in the house of late, the weather having been so favourable for hunting, &c., that I have not forwarded your songs as you perhaps wished.

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<sup>1</sup> Coleman was applied to in 1809, Thomson "being convinced that there is not a poet living who could match melodies of a lively and animated kind" with greater felicity. For six songs Thomson offered him twenty-five guineas.

Perhaps you may think from the one sent that it is as well that there are no more such in existence. You well know that there is no forcing composition of any kind, and when anything assumes the appearance of a task, the few ideas that a man may be master of are very apt to move off. I can make nothing, I fear, of "Johnnie comin', quo' she." There are but three ideas in the first nine lines—saw ye him comin'—a blue bonnet on his head—his doggie rinnin'. I should gladly send you something, but when I attempt to think of it, the reiterated "Quo' she" drives all before it. If I do hit on anything it certainly will not be humorous.<sup>1</sup> As this is a very bad day and I must be imprisoned, before closing this I shall attempt something for "The brisk young lad," as you wish to have it soon. [The writer had left off here, and later in the day continued:] I have sent you six stanzas for "The brisk young lad," which you may perceive are the performance of an ancient maiden. I have also sent you some words which I made some time ago for the "Braes of Auchtertyre," which, when played *slow* and a very little altered, is in my opinion very pretty.

On the outside of this letter Thomson has inscribed the titles of the four songs—"East Nook," "Soldier Laddie," "Brisk young lad," and "Braes o' Ochtertyre"—adding the remark: "The first of the four worth more than the other three." The version of the "East Neuk" which he subsequently published is undoubtedly better than that of the MS.: whether the improvements were his own or Boswell's does not appear. Boswell's "Soldier Laddie" was ultimately supplanted by a song of William Smyth's for the same air; and as for "The

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<sup>1</sup> Joanna Baillie subsequently wrote a song for this air.

brisk young lad," Thomson wedded that tune to "The gaberlunzie man," attributed to James V.

On the 16th of February 1802 Boswell writes enclosing a song, "Far in the glen, whence yonder light."

I send some stanzas for "Scornfu' Nancy," though I have taken the liberty to change her character not a little from the repulsive. There's rather too much of it, but as the stanzas, like a true lover's ideas, have very little connection with each other, you may take out or put in at pleasure without in the slightest degree marring the *existing* continuity. It is not easy to express how inimical I am to the measure. Never did I attempt a line that shackled me so much as the short line ending with a double rhyme. Our language is very poor in this particular, and those we have are in general light or ludicrous. In writing these stanzas I was obliged to throw away many a good image and thought (that is perhaps saying too much), but at least many much better than I have adopted, because I had no double rhyme for them.

Thomson marks this song "But so so," but he prints it nevertheless—in the third volume of his Scottish collection. Boswell now attempted a song to the tune of "The Auld Gudeman," the result being "I'll hae my coat o' gude snuff-brown," also published in the third volume. The dialogue, he explains, is "between a muirland laird and his steward (housekeeper), as such are called among the country people"; and he adds that perhaps the words may be of too coarse a texture for Thomson's collection; if so, some others may be thought of. "Rather homely, though not without humour," is

Thomson's verdict. Boswell's next effort was a song for the Welsh air, "Men of Harlech." He succeeded so little as to write a verse which could not by any possibility be fitted to the tune! We may take his excuse in his own words. "I find the Welsh airs so very irregular," says he to Thomson, "that I do not think it possible to *make words* for them—at least there is no stanza that I know which will suit them." After giving his version of the "Men of Harlech," he continues :

If you will take the trouble to try *nonsense* lines for the other airs you have sent, you will find how strange the lines must be. "Sir Watkin" will do, and the Irish air for two voices. "Sheelan O'Gary" I don't admire ; and "A rock and a wee pickle tow" has very capital words already, which I have heard an aunt of mine sing very often.

Upon this last Thomson remarks that the song is "doubtless an extremely good one of its kind, and I would not on any account omit it. But I should be very glad to have one of your spinning to such a pleasant tune—one that would be intelligible in the South, where they can make little or nothing of the auld wife's story."<sup>1</sup> As to the irregularity of the measures, of which Boswell complains, Thomson answers that the Welsh airs "*are* doubtless irregular, but not more so than several Scotch airs to which excellent words have been written."

Thomson's request now is for a set of new words for the air of "Rise up and bar the door."

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<sup>1</sup> The "auld wife's story" was subsequently taken in hand by Mrs. Grant.

Boswell sends his attempt in December 1803, with the remark that when he has the pleasure of seeing the editor he will sing it in his own way. "I have some prospect of being in Edinburgh in spring or before, when I shall avail myself of the opportunity of hearing you in some of the accompaniments and symphonies which, according to my unlettered taste, you perform most agreeably." The "effort of fancy," as Boswell called his song, did not meet with Thomson's approval. Boswell had versified a blood-curdling story of clan revenge, and his song in consequence was "too horrible for singing." Thomson accordingly prints the old words for the air, with Burns' "Does haughty Gaul" as an alternative. The next air sent to Boswell is that of "We'll make a bed in the barn," which Thomson thinks would be "a famous vehicle for a drinking-song, the description of a harvest home, or kirn, or any rural merry-making that may have come under your observation." He feels sure that, furnished as it is with Haydn's symphonies and accompaniments, Boswell will be "perfectly charmed" with it. But Boswell is not charmed. He does not think much of the air; "it is vulgar, although the author of *The Creation* might draw harmony from any source." The nationality of the air is uncertain, and so, "as few people sing more than one stanza," Boswell sends "an English, an Irish, and a Scotch stanza, which your vivacious friends may take *ad libitum*." He must add that "the measure is most execrably cramp and creates a troublesome change of accent." If it were not so



he would "send some other words of a more general nature, not so peculiarly fitted for toppers." The song is that beginning, "The parson boasts of mild ale," which Thomson prints, without the Scotch stanza, in the first volume of his Irish collection.

The airs now sent to Boswell were those of "Paddy O'Rafferty" (for which he wrote one of his best known songs) and "The humours of Limerick." The latter, says Thomson, "commands universal admiration," and Boswell must "confer immortality upon it by a song worthy of its beauty." The only words Thomson has ever heard sung to it are "the doggerel ones which Johnstone<sup>1</sup> sings so charmingly in *Looney M'Twolter*." To this Boswell replies :

"The Humours of Limerick" is a most beautiful air. I have long admired it. I send you lines written for it by Goldsmith, which I learnt from my father were intended for the lady in *She stoops to conquer*, but the actress not being able to sing, they were omitted :

"Ah! me! how shall I marry me!  
Lovers are plenty but fail to relieve me.  
The fond youth who could carry me  
Offers to love but means to deceive me.  
Yet I will rally and combat my ruiner;  
Not a look, not a sigh shall my passion discover.  
She who trusts all to the false one pursuing her  
Makes but a penitent, loses her lover."

I observe the air has been altered for *Looney M'Twolter*. It is not that exactly I was taught, and which I shall hum over when I see you in Edinburgh.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Johnstone, an old Edinburgh favourite, and a luckless native of the city. In 1823 he opened the old Pantheon under the name of the Caledonian Theatre. Thomson calls him "the inimitable."



Boswell's verses for this air begin, "Farewell! mirth and hilarity," which he directs "must be sung with a little of the brogue." In their first form it is hardly necessary to say that they failed to please Thomson. What precisely were his objections it is impossible to tell, the letter being missing. This is the more to be regretted as Boswell writes in some heat in reply to his criticisms. He says (Nov. 21, 1811):

You imposed upon me a very arduous task when you asked me to write words to "The humours of Limerick," or "Ballamagairy," and I hold Goldsmith better authority both for the name and air than the author of *The Wags of Windsor*. Goldsmith found it very difficult in its simplicity, but now cut and broken for the unmeaning doggerel of *Looney M'Twolter*, the task has become more that of a stonecutter than a poet. You are well aware that the English language does not furnish many words to serve as trisyllabic rhymes, even by combination, without descending to low humour, and it is rarely possible to get *three*, which the air requires. I confess my total sterility, and nothing but persevering industry at dumb crambo or some such exercise could fit a Grub Street genius for *Looney M'Twolter*. Observe, too, that the last line of the second part has the moderate number of *three* rhymes in itself. It is therefore an unpleasant struggle, where words, not ideas, must be sought after. I have added a stanza, and have made a slight alteration or two, and so bid it adieu, making you perfectly welcome to alter it in any way you can; but at the last I have little hopes of its meeting with either praise or indulgence, for few are aware of the obstacles to be overcome. . . . I am glad you like "Paddy O'Rafferty," which has the same cursed trisyllabic metre, but by homely phrases that is got more easily over.

Boswell had certainly not got easily over "The humours of Limerick." The next song, about which there are several letters from both sides, was "The pulse of an Irishman," another of Boswell's best known efforts, written in 1812 for the air of "St. Patrick's Day." Profiting by past experience, he sends first the opening verse to see "if the stile will do." The "stile" was all right, but of course there were minor faults. "You must not be too fastidious," says Boswell, "or I must succumb. As 'St. Patrick's Day' is a *peculiar* Irish air, the words, I think, should be so too. I don't choose to throw in the *brogue*, but a mixture of grave imagery with the homely, marks the wild fancy of the Irish more than anything else, except their most wonderful, naturally flowing humour, which a Scotchman must *struggle* for in vain. I send you another stanza, and I think the two quite enough. It is a good fault for a song to be short, and it is better that your company should regret the brevity than yawn over a tedious ditty."

Boswell was sadly troubled with the Irish airs. In 1812 Thomson sent him the tune called by him "A trip to the Dargle," with a request for words. The outcome was the song "Let brain-spinning swains," printed in the first volume of the Irish collection. Regarding this lyric Boswell writes on September 9 :

This tune, which is "Paddy Whack," or some such air, and to which "Thurot's Defeat" was sung half a century ago, has puzzled me as much as any I ever tried, except "The humours of Ballamagairy"—the one

from its awkward measure for the English language, this from the occupation it had of my mind from early impression. Many faults the words must have, but really it is not easy to avoid faults in such compositions. If too homely, I am sure your female friends will afford you abundance of sweet measures, and I sincerely assure you that I shall not take it in the slightest degree amiss your throwing mine aside. I have on the spur of the moment . . . written what perhaps on cool reflection I would burn, but I leave that office to you after consideration.

Thomson did not think it necessary to apply to his female friends in the matter. If Boswell would only substitute "potatoes" for "taties," the song would do. That alteration, curiously enough, had occurred to Boswell himself, "as 'taties' was too vulgar, without aiding the character, and unless something characteristic is peculiarly marked, it is always in bad taste to be vulgar." It was, indeed, a great thing to "aid the character"! The song "Morning a cruel turmoiler is"—so the author explained—was "thrown among the *lower* Irish, and therefore if it is characteristic, that must compensate for its vulgarity." The dictum may be of some value in explaining the coarse humour which marks some of Boswell's graphic efforts. There is a further indication of his taste in the following letter of December 24, 1816, the last which I will quote:

I have, I believe, now contributed above a score of songs to your work, the greater part of which, if they have not peculiar merit, have the merit of *peculiarity*. I have throughout endeavoured to enter into the character

of the airs, and in some I have succeeded, in others failed. In that I also have doubly failed, for it is *not peculiar*. On the whole I think you have been fortunate in your song-writers, though, as might be expected in so voluminous a work, there are many very tame performances which, excepting that they were set to favourite airs, no one would read twice. Many, however, even of these, have the merit that they may be read and sung without offence to decency, which their more vivid originals might not.

While you have exerted yourself to set forth Scottish melodies in full dress and with becoming language, I have in vain endeavoured to get a collection of the more exceptionable but more original effusions. I once had a printed copy of the old words of a number of old songs, but it was stolen from me when at College. Are you acquainted [with] or in possession of any collection of these? While you are bringing the airs into good company, the antiquary would gladly trace from what company you have freed them.

Boswell had the "gentlemanly" tastes of his period in the matter of song, but in the indulgence of these it was not likely that Thomson should care greatly to assist him.

For Thomson's works he wrote in all eighteen songs. Twenty-four songs were indeed printed, but six of these were already in existence and were used "by special permission." Among the latter were some of the best, including "Jenny's Bawbee." Thomson coolly tried to induce Boswell to convey to him "exclusive property" in all the twenty-four, naming them, and sending a formal document for him to sign. Boswell, however, drew up a "conveyance" of his own, omitting the songs on pp. 165, 173, 174,

182, and 197 of the fourth volume of the Scottish collection, and the song on p. 136 of the second volume of the Irish, and this he returned signed, without comment. It is hardly necessary to add that he contributed all his songs without fee or reward. He accepted one picture from Thomson, and returned another with his "best compliments." What "difficult" mortals these versifiers of Thomson's were, to be sure!

### JOANNA BAILLIE

If Thomson had been content to take her own estimate of her powers as a song-writer, Joanna Baillie would certainly not have enriched his various collections to the extent that she did. She protests again and again that she cannot write songs, and pleads in every other letter that Thomson will reduce the number of his requests. She tells him that she has "little time for writing pieces of this kind"—that she has neither pleasure in the task nor inclination for it. "It is," she says in 1810, "a work I don't at all find myself at home in, being, whatever kind of a poet you may be pleased to reckon me, a very unready and indifferent rhymester. I never wrote a song in my life from inclination, therefore I certainly am not naturally a song-writer." In 1813 she repeats that she has frequently told her correspondent that she has "no pleasure in writing songs"; and so she goes on to the end of the correspondence.



The "immortal Joanna," as Scott calls her,<sup>1</sup> was really too modest. She proved by more than one effort that she could write very good songs; and if anything at all from her pen is destined to live, it is surely such things as "Up! quit thy bower," "Woo'd an' married an' a'," "It fell on a morning when we were thrang," "Saw ye Johnnie comin'?" and other lyrical productions. It was Thomson's belief that her songs would remain united with the music to which he had wedded them "to the latest posterity" (a favourite phrase of his), and "endear her name to the sons and daughters of taste throughout the kingdom." But indeed this was his fond hope in regard to the productions of all his songsters.

When Thomson opened his correspondence with Miss Baillie in 1804 he was engaged with his Welsh airs, and still had a dozen or more of these to match. On the 30th of January he sends seven melodies, and "would fain hope that in the intervals of your more important labours you may find it an amusement to comply with my request." In short he will be "greatly mortified and disappointed" if she should decline writing these songs, as he is "most anxiously desirous of having a few from your most admirable pen." At the same time he begs that she will ask her friend Mrs. Hunter to assist in the work. Her volume (Mrs. Hunter's poems were published in 1802) "contains some charming songs," and the

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<sup>1</sup> She objects in one letter to Thomson's "adding the title of either Miss or Mistress to my name, which has a formality in it that I dislike."



editor has been seriously thinking of "soliciting verses from her for a few of the other airs not yet provided for." Miss Baillie replies from Hampstead on February 18 :

I received your polite letter about a week ago, along with that from my friend Miss Millar. I am always ready to agree to whatever she wishes, but independently of this, to the friend of Burns and my own countryman [Miss Baillie was a native of Lanarkshire] it is impossible to refuse, in such a work as you are engaged in, any little assistance that I am able to give. I have lost no time in writing Mrs. Hunter, and have the pleasure to inform you that she cheerfully grants your request. I sent her the music with your paper of directions, desiring her to take her choice of the airs in the first place, and she has already this morning sent me her contribution to the work. This consists of three songs, with which I flatter myself you will be perfectly satisfied. If your people of taste in Edinburgh are disposed to find fault with them, I must really be permitted to say they are very difficult, or rather, in good plain Scotch, they are very *misleart*. . . . In regard to my own part of the task, I shall do it as well as I can, but as I have really neither the elegance nor the skill in musical numbers that are required for this kind of writing, and should never in my life have written a single song if I had not sometimes wanted one for my own particular purposes, you must not be surprised if those I send you should not prove exactly what you would wish. If they should not, I beg you will make no ceremony in setting them aside. I shall take the first opportunity of sending you my packet when it is completed.

The packet was despatched to Edinburgh on the 21st of March (1804), Miss Baillie again remarking that she would not take it at all amiss should

her songs be set aside in favour of something better that might fall into Thomson's hands. The editor did not find it necessary to set anything aside; but, as usual, he found a great deal to say in the way of criticism and suggested alterations. In fact the correspondence is at first so largely taken up with these details in regard to the songs that it is not possible to make use of it by quotation in the ordinary way. Miss Baillie was not quite so pliable as some other writers who subjected themselves to the tinkering of the finical editor. Indeed, she replies to his strictures with admirable spirit. Thomson objects to a stanza of one song as being distinctly inferior; Miss Baillie "must e'en in the sturdy spirit of an author" beg leave to think that it is "rather the best of them all." In her "Maid of Llanwellyn" she had spoken of lakes in Wales, and Thomson was in his critical chair at once. But the lady would not listen to him. She could wish that for the maid's sake there *were* lakes in Wales; but "as lakes will not rise out of the earth for our convenience, and I am unwilling to alter the line, we must just hope that a good proportion of our readers will be as ignorant or thoughtless as I was when I wrote it, and that those who are not so will have the good nature to suppose that this lover of hers, though in love with a Welsh woman, might be himself a Cumberland man, and that will set everything right." Here is the natural antagonism between the artist and the schoolmaster greedy for "facts," the artist not greatly concerned whether there are rivers in

both Macedon and Monmouth. Thomson was always a schoolmaster's son.

Her "Inspired Bard" is thought by Thomson to be too "provokingly short"; but it seems to the writer to be "a whole as it stands," and she will not add to it. She makes a husband say: "Last year of earth's treasures I gave thee my part," and Thomson wants the line changed because "it is not very clear what he gave." But the line "if you please had better remain as it is." It is "as much as to say, 'I endow thee with all my worldly goods,' which will, I should think, in this country at least, where similar words are used in the marriage ceremony, be perfectly understood."

Miss Baillie showed, in truth, scant patience with the troublesome fastidiousness, not to say the pedestrian imagination, of her correspondent. The latter could not understand—

"The rarest things to light of day  
Look shortly forth and shrink away,"

and he asks to have the lines made plainer. But the only reply he receives is that "a degree of obscurity is allowed in poetry," and "I will, with your permission, shelter myself under this privilege." Miss Baillie has written "Meek as a nun in her mantle of grey," and Thomson wants to substitute "vestments" for "mantle." But vestments is "too artificial a word," and she will not have it on any account. Another line, "And welcome moth and drowsy fly," was too much for Thomson—at any rate the moth was—but the

poetess stuck to it notwithstanding. In a letter of 17th January 1809 she says :

I should be very glad to make the alteration you wish, but the moth along with the drowsy fly seems to me so characteristic of twilight that I am unwilling to leave it out ; and besides, the substitute you propose of "every drowsy fly" is too much a loose undetermined expression that savours of commonplace. At least it strikes me so, and therefore, if you please, we will let the line stand as it was originally written. I am really sorry not to alter the line to your taste, as I am sure, from your writing expressly about this line, there must be something in the word "moth" really disagreeable to your ear. If this be so, I have no objection to your altering the line as you propose, but then you must have the goodness in a note at the bottom of the page where it is printed to mention that you have so altered it, and to give the line there as I originally wrote it. In this way your readers, or rather your singers, will choose for themselves, and if your line should become more popular than mine I shall not at all be offended.

There is quite a discussion about a phrase in a song on the black cock—a "beautiful species of game found among the Welsh mountains," as Thomson had thoughtfully informed the lady when sending her the air so named. Thomson found the song "truly fanciful and poetical," but he did not think the meaning of "Thy crimson moon" would be sufficiently understood. On that point Miss Baillie has this to say :

I meant the phrase to express the kind of arched spot of deep red that is over each of the eyes of this bird ; but as I never really saw the bird but once a long time

ago, and take my account of him from a book, it may probably not be sufficiently descriptive. If you are not acquainted with the heath cock yourself you had better refer the matter—if you think it is worth while to be at so much trouble—to some of your friends who are acquainted with him. If the present expression is not approved of, you may change it into “Thy crimson-moon’d and azure eye,” or “Thy crimson-archéd azure eye”; but I like the present, viz. “Thy crimson moon and azure eye,” best.

And so the correspondence goes on—always new calls for amendment, usually in regard to some nicety of expression on which Thomson’s criticism was either unnecessary or inept. It is impossible not to see that the lively authoress has much the best of it, and one cannot be sorry that for once Thomson was withstood to his face.

But it is time to leave these little details, although they are certainly not without their value in helping us further to form an estimate of Thomson’s critical powers. Miss Baillie, by her own confession, “hated writing a letter most perfectly,” but on Thomson’s behalf she seems to have got over her antipathy pretty easily. There are in all thirty-five of her letters among his papers. On the 6th of January 1810 she writes about her new play, *The Family Legend*, which was about to be produced in Edinburgh, Thomson having in the previous letter remarked to her that he had often wondered at her dramas “being so much confined to the closet.” She says:

You are very kind to express your satisfaction at learning I have a play coming out at Edinburgh. I



trust you will have the goodness, with my other friends there, to give it your good countenance, and speak as favourably of it as your conscience will possibly allow you.

The play was brought out under the auspices of Scott, who wrote a prologue for it, the author of *The Man of Feeling* furnishing an epilogue. It proved an immense success. "You have only to imagine," wrote Scott to the authoress, "all that you could wish to give success to a play, and your conceptions will still fall short of the complete and decided triumph of *The Family Legend*. Everything that pretended to distinction, whether from rank or literature, was in the boxes, and in the pit such an aggregate mass of humanity as I have seldom if ever witnessed in the same place." The tragedy ran for fourteen consecutive nights at this time, and it was repeated on several subsequent occasions.

On the 8th of May 1810 Miss Baillie writes on behalf of James Grahame, the author of *The Sabbath*, and one of Thomson's contributors, who had taken orders in the Church of England after failing at the Scottish Bar :

There is a very great favour I must ask of you. Mr. James Grahame, author of *The Sabbath*, with whom you are probably acquainted, and who is now a clergyman of the English Church, is at present a candidate for the Lectureship [*sic*] of St. George's Chapel in Edinburgh, and the nomination belongs to the vestry, consisting of [here follows a list of twelve names, including Lord Elibank and Mr. Erskine of Mar]. If amongst



these names you should have the goodness to exert your interest to procure us some votes for Mr. Grahame, I should think myself exceedingly indebted to you. I have never heard Mr. Grahame preach; but he did preach to a polite congregation in London, some time ago, and a lady who heard him, and is, I should think, qualified to judge, told me his manner of preaching and his sermon were both very good, and seemed to make a very favourable impression on his audience. This favour of course I can only beg as far as your other connections or engagements may permit you to act.

Less than eighteen months after this the author of *The Sabbath* was in his grave, and Scott was writing to Miss Baillie: "Poor Grahame, gentle and amiable and enthusiastic, deserves all you can say of him; his was really a hallowed harp, as he was himself an Israelite without guile." Grahame did not get the Edinburgh appointment, though he preached as a candidate. Mrs. Grant of Laggan, in one of her letters, tells of hearing him on the occasion, and pleasantly describes both himself and his sermon.

In 1811 Thomson wrote to Miss Baillie asking for a song in praise of music that might be placed first in his next volume. He suggested a kind of "Ode to St Cecilia," but this quite frightened the poetess. In sending some lines as a sort of reply to his request, she says: "I have not at all obliged you, and feel very sincerely that it is not in my power, having never written anything the least like an ode in my life, and being perfectly convinced that if I did it would be a very bad one." Miss Baillie's effort ("Sweet power of song!") neverthe-

less delighted the heart of Thomson ; it was “an admirable song,” nay, it was “a jewel.” He had just one fault to find with it : the word “hight” was certainly known to every reader of Spenser, but Johnson declared it obsolete, and the editor would doubt the propriety of using it in a song.

In sending, in December 1811, the song “The gowan glitters on the sward,” Miss Baillie makes an apology for her spelling of Scotch words. She remarks that she has written “such Scotch as is still spoken in the country,” and continues : “I hope you will not think it very bad ; and as I don’t very well know how to spell the Scotch words, I shall be obliged to you if you will have the goodness to correct the spelling. ‘Know,’ which I mean for a hillock or knoll, I have spelt like the verb, which I daresay is wrong. ‘Luckey,’ which I mean for grandmother, is probably wrong too ; and so on.” It is curious that Miss Baillie, who had the command of a varied Scotch vocabulary, should thus have to confess her weakness in Scotch orthography.

This year, that is to say in 1811, she published a third volume of her *Plays on the Passions*, and copies were sent to her Edinburgh friends through Mr. Ballantyne. Thomson, of course, received one, and equally of course waxed enthusiastic over the contents. Writing on the 26th of December, he says :

I know not how to thank you for the exquisite treat I have received from your new volume, which I have read over twice with inexpressible pleasure and admiration. We have had no dramas since the days of Shakespeare so

richly poetical, so marked by bold delineation of character, and so imprest with fine strokes of nature and feeling, as your tragical series. I am fully as much charmed with the plays in the present volume as with any of the former ones. I shall not presume to offer any minute criticism upon them, for I feel that I could do very little else but expatiate on their numerous beauties. There is no pleasure to which I look forward with more eager expectation than the representation of them on the stage. Mrs. Henry Siddons will perform the part of "Orra" [in the tragedy on "Fear"] admirably well, and the heroine of the superlatively beautiful little serious drama. Our manager knows his own interest too well to neglect bringing out plays that will fill his house. They could not be seen and heard more advantageously than in Edinburgh, as we have now got the neatest, most compact, and best constructed theatre in the kingdom, where the witchery of the eye and the softest tones of the voice can reach every part of the house, by which means we shall probably see just, easy and natural acting take refuge amongst us when it is banished from London.<sup>1</sup> It is to be regretted that your very judicious observations on colossal theatres did not appear before the foundation of Drury Lane was laid, as the proprietors might have been induced to pause and perhaps to build two theatres of moderate dimensions in different parts of the town, instead of one that I fear will be fit for little else but splendid pantomime. . . .

Without meaning anything like compliment, I cannot help thinking you peculiarly happy in lyric composition, and every one must be of that opinion who reads the excellent songs with which you have enriched your little drama.

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<sup>1</sup> Compare Scott's letter to Joanna Baillie, October 27, 1809: "I went through the theatre, which is the most complete little thing I ever saw, elegantly fitted up, and large enough for every purpose."

Proceeding with the letters in their order of date, we come now to a communication of Thomson's which led to the composition of the well-known "O swiftly glides the bonny boat." Writing on October 14, 1815, he says :

If you find it agreeable to hold converse with the muse for a leisure hour, I would be extremely gratified and obliged by your inditing a ballad of two or three stanzas for the beautiful Scottish air enclosed, to which Beethoven has composed delightful accompaniments. The words commonly sung are exceedingly poor, fit only for the nursery, and such as I should be ashamed to insert in one of my volumes. I shall transcribe the first stanza as your guide to the measure. [Here follow sixteen lines of Ewen's "O weel may the boatie row."] I well know what a charming fisherman's ballad *you* will produce if you turn the subject in your mind, and I can assure you that the music is deserving of the gift which I solicit. When Mrs. Campbell<sup>1</sup> sings it and plays it to you, I am certain that you will be charmed with it.

The boat-song did not reach Thomson until nearly two years after this, and not expecting to receive it, he had "got the old ditty patched and mended." But the new song is "worth an hundred of its predecessor, and delights all to whom we sing it." Of

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<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Hunter's daughter, who was married to General Sir James Campbell. Sir James died in 1819, and Lady Campbell married again, retaining her first husband's name. "You would see, perhaps, by the papers some time ago that Lady Campbell, Mrs. Hunter's daughter, is married again. She has ventured upon another soldier, who is a lieutenant-colonel in the Guards, Colonel Charliwood, but he has a good character for being a worthy, good-tempered man, so I hope she will be happy with him."—*Joanna Baillie to Thomson, September 13, 1821.*

course this compliment was but the preliminary to asking another favour. The song wanted now is "for a melody called 'Todlin' hame,' which has ever been a particular favourite of mine, but the words to which, though not without merit, are of a cast too broad and vulgar for the present generation." The song is "never sung, and is quite on the shelf," but the melody must not be allowed to share its fate. The result of this application was the song, "Poverty parts good company," which Miss Baillie sent off to Edinburgh six days after Thomson wrote. In the accompanying note she says :

I had indeed considered myself as having done with song-writing, and must be allowed so to consider myself, but the air you have sent me being an old favourite of mine, and the old words so very bad, I could not resist your request. I hope the verses I enclose will somewhat answer your purpose, and if Mrs. Hogarth will have the goodness to favour them with her sweet voice, they will stand their best chance of being well received in your musical circle. . . . I have had more trouble with the first lines than all the other lines put together, and I hope I have made them what you intended.

In the next letter we get some idea of what was the extent of Thomson's acquaintance with the Doric, which he so often condemned. On the 17th of September he writes to Miss Baillie :

Fair fa' you, my good madam ! and mony braw thanks to you for one o' the bonniest sangs that ever was [*sic*] written by man or womankind. You have really done honour to "Todlin' hame" by "Poverty parts good company." Your thoughts on that subject will evermore



delight good company, and I foretell will sometimes prolong the hour of parting and of todlin' hame. I shall sing nae ither sang for a towmond [twelvemonth] to come. . . . Oh ! for the power of producing such songs, for then would I cleed twa or three ither bonnie Scotch tunes which have not yet been attired as they deserve. I shall indeed be as proud as a peacock of "Poverty parts good company" appearing in my book. You are deeply read in the fine old Doric of our language. The "bruse" and the "infare"<sup>1</sup> are finely introduced, though they will send many of our fine ladies, and gentlemen too, to the glossary.

Thomson himself would have done well to go to the glossary. "I should think 'cruisie' a diminutive of your own making, 'cruise' being an English word," says he. Imagine a Scotsman of Thomson's day never having heard of the "cruisie"! Of course, Miss Baillie had a ready answer for such a lamentable piece of ignorance :

As to "cruisie," it is, I assure you, no diminutive of my own making, but the ordinary name in our part of the West of Scotland for a small iron lamp, with a pointed handle to it, which they stuck into the wall when they wanted to fix it there ; and such lamps lighted up the barn for a wedding or harvest kirk before the modern refinement of tallow candles, stuck on the wall with their own grease or a lump of clay, came into use. I am, therefore, not willing to part with the "cruisie." The last Scotch wedding I was at I saw the bride snuff the candles (so stuck to the wall) with her ain dainty fingers.

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<sup>1</sup> "Infare" is defined by Jamieson as "an entertainment given to friends upon newly entering a house." In some versions of Miss Baillie's song the line in which the word occurs is stupidly printed : "At bridal and in fair I've braced me wi' pride."



In spite of his repeated promises, and Miss Baillie's as often repeated protests, Thomson in January 1822 applied for another song, this time for the tune of "Woo'd an' married an' a'." Luckily for him, there were circumstances which led Miss Baillie to favour him once more. Writing on February 27, she says :

I guess this may be about the thirteenth time you have promised to me that the song you asked me to write should be the last. You must now in good and honest faith fulfil that promise, for I am heartily tired of song-writing, which I never at any time did like. I should have stood out sturdily against this last request but for these reasons: first that I was unwilling that your engraving should not have something written to correspond with it; and secondly, that I wish you to help me a little in a subscription which I am carrying on for the benefit of a friend. I am going to edit a volume of collected poems, and I wish you to set down your name for one single copy, and to forward the subscription among your friends as much as you can, without doing anything irksome or unpleasant to yourself. Call on my friend Mrs. [Dr. Andrew] Thomson in George Street, and she will tell you all about it, and give you a subscription paper. Now remember that you are *not* to put down your name for more than one copy, for that would hurt me exceedingly. I hope to make it a very good collection, chiefly composed of MS. poems, some of them by the first writers of this country. There will be a few of my own in it, but no *songs* of mine, one (perhaps) excepted, which has never been printed at all. I have, with Lady Campbell's permission, picked out some very pretty things from the MSS. which Mrs. Hunter left behind her, and those I know you will like to see. . . .

Will you have the goodness to give my love to Mrs. Thomson of George Street, and tell her that Sir Walter Scott will inform her what bank in Edinburgh all the money gathered there for the subscription is to be paid into. . . . It must be a branch of the Royal Bank of Scotland, and I have begged of Sir Walter to fix it for me.

The work here referred to was the volume of *Poetic Miscellanies*, published in 1823. It contained poems by Scott, Mrs. Hemans, Catherine Fanshawe, and others, and brought a very satisfactory pecuniary result.

Notwithstanding Miss Baillie's urgent request that this should be considered her last song, Thomson had the temerity to ask her for still another. He made his apology when acknowledging the receipt of "Woo'd an' married an' a'," which he declares "will be one of our most popular songs, for a more natural and pleasing group never was painted." He says :

I cannot, my dear madam, adequately express the sense I have of your uniform kindness, nor my contrition for having so repeatedly put it to the proof. The temptation was greater than I could resist ; every song you wrote was more and more delectable, and increase of appetite grew by what it fed on. And having got myself persuaded that an exercise in which you so much excelled could not be unpleasant to you, I became a petitioner year after year, overleaping the resolution which I had previously formed not to trespass further on your good nature.

He goes on to say that he is now fully determined to abide by his resolution, and will only suggest that

she should write just one more song by way of farewell. If she will consent to do this, he proposes to send her Flaxman's illustrations of the Iliad—"an exquisite work for your drawing-room table, and capable of gratifying every person of elegant taste." The song is to be for his favourite air of "Hooly and fairly."

Alas! poor Thomson, he had found another Burns in this matter of rewards. Already he had received two warnings that Miss Baillie suffered from a pertinacity of pride about such things. In December 1809, he sent her a present of "a scarf manufactured here, one of a small number that were considered such a remarkable resemblance of the Indian, both in figure and fabric, as to have obtained from our Board of Trustees a premium to the manufacturer." He hoped that she retained some national partialities, and that she "may be pleased with the shawl, though it very poorly testifies the gratitude I feel for your kindness." Mrs. Hunter was presented with a similar gift at the same time. Miss Baillie wrote :

Many thanks to you for your very handsome gift. There is only one thing that diminishes my pleasure in receiving it, that is, that I don't think I deserve it. I saw Mrs. Hunter, who may wear her shawl with less compunction, last night; she wore it about her shoulders, and a lady who was near her with an Indian shawl did not look so handsomely equipped.

A shawl was a little thing : when it came to further gifts, Miss Baillie would have none of them. In

November 1812, when Thomson was "again a petitioner for a few more songs," he entreated her "to accept of the book herewith sent—the new edition of Beaumont and Fletcher in fourteen volumes." Will it be believed? Miss Baillie not only declined the books, she would not even give them house-room until Thomson should say what might be done with them, but sent them in hot haste to his brother! On February 1, 1813, she wrote, evidently in a temper:

I have always said to you that a copy of your work when published was a sufficient reward for any little assistance I might give to the work, and when I accepted the drawing and the shawl, it was with some struggle against my own feelings that I did so; and I had flattered myself that I had so expressed myself on this subject that nothing of this kind would on your part have been repeated. I am sorry you have not done me the honour to suppose that I did really speak it in sincerity; and I must be allowed to say you ought to have spared me this pain.

Why there should have been any "pain" about accepting such a gift is not quite clear to the ordinary male mind. One must really sympathise with Thomson in these frequent rebuffs arising from his clearly earnest desire to do the correct thing by his writers. As he tells Miss Baillie, he had no idea of her being insincere; he merely thought that he might induce her "to accept of a small present" when he was asking a favour which he "considered to be of great value." The curious thing is that he should have put himself again in the same awkward

position in 1822. Miss Baillie, it need hardly be said, was then as determined as ever :

I cannot possibly accept of your intended present of Flaxman's illustrations of the Iliad, nor of any other present, your own publication always excepted. It gives me great pain that you should propose any other recompense ; let me entreat you to do so no more. As you so solemnly protest that this is the last song you will ask from me, I wish that we should part friends, and have already written words to "Hooly and fairly," which is a tune I used formerly to sing along with the guitar ; but I will not send it till you have promised me faithfully that neither Flaxman's Iliad nor anything whatever shall be sent to me. When you have done this to my satisfaction you shall have the song.

After this Thomson could only keep his Iliad and "look for the return of the post from Hampstead with a lover's impatience." He had not long to wait. "I send you your song," says Miss Baillie, "which I am better pleased with myself than with most of those that have gone before it, but that is no proof of its being good. However, if you sing it yourself with some of that glee which you give to 'Muirland Willie,' nobody will find fault with it." Thomson has pencilled various alterations on the manuscript copy of this song ("Oh what had I ado for to marry?"), the explanation of which we find in his next letter. After expressing his "humble opinion" that "Hooly and fairly" is inferior to "Woo'd an' married an' a'," he proceeds to say that there are some words in the song which he really does not understand—words that are not to be found in Jamieson. There is "babs," for example—"Wi'



*babs* o' red roses and breast-knots o'erlaid." Thomson knows the word "babery," signifying finery, but "babs" is "not to be seen in any glossary or dictionary." As a matter of fact "babs" is in the indispensable Jamieson, where it is defined as "a nosegay or bunch of flowers." Miss Baillie, again, had written, "She *bardies* the ellers and mocks at Mess John." Thomson would have her give up "bardies" as being unintelligible to ninety-nine out of every hundred readers. And so on. It is more evident than ever that our editor's knowledge of Scotch was limited!

Thomson's next request was for a new version of "Fie! let us a' to the wedding!" Miss Baillie sent what she called the "auld sang new busket" in January 1827, and at the same time wrote :

When I read your obliging and very flattering letter I at first felt somewhat angry that you should wish to disturb our old popular ballad of "Fie! let us a' to the wedding," and thought that nothing put in its place would have any chance of pleasing my northern countrymen, but some time afterwards it came suddenly into my head that it might be managed without giving them offence, and I set about it forthwith. I have let the rough copy lie by me these ten days, and now send you the fair one with a very few corrections, and if it should be lucky enough to please you, you are welcome to it. The character of the old song is preserved, for I would not think of altering that; yet I question whether the admirers of the old rigmarole with all its pithy nicknames will give me any thanks for what I have done—or you either for what you have set me upon doing.

There is now a long break in the correspondence, and when Miss Baillie writes next, on the



21st of December 1836, it is in reply to some account which Thomson had sent her of a visit to the Western Isles :

It gave me much pleasure to learn that you had been amongst the Western Isles, and had enjoyed your excursion. For that you did enjoy it to the bent is well seen by your sublime and poetical description of Staffa and its wonderful Cave. In truth you write with the fancy and vigour of a young poet, and this encourages me to think that if the mind is young the body must be in good health. Long may you be in this state ! And how very kind you have been in sending me the sketches to give me a more perfect idea of the scenes ! Some five or six and twenty years ago I received a similar description of the Cave in a letter from Sir Walter Scott, who visited it before the time of steamboats, when the navigation was made difficult and dangerous. He did not indeed send me a real pencil-sketch of its wonders, but he sent me some pebbles picked up by himself on the shores of Iona, which are among my precious things to this day. Many thanks for your friendly remembrance of me. I must thank you, too, for the cheering things you say on the subject of my late-published Dramas.<sup>1</sup> I am truly glad that you think I shall lose no credit by them ; for it was altogether rather perilous to venture before the public again so late in the day, and after such a lapse of time. This, which may be called my last offering, has been received with great friendship and indulgence, and I retire contented and gratified. I don't know whether you are amongst those who dislike and condemn the character of my jealous man, Romeiro. If you are, pray for my sake look at the last number of *Fraser's Magazine*, and see what I have there said in defence of it.

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<sup>1</sup> Miss Baillie published 3 vols. of *Miscellaneous Plays* in 1836.

In Miss Baillie's next letter, dated January 11, 1838, there is a reference of some interest. With regard to the suggestion about Lord Dudley it is impossible to say anything definite. Lockhart's statement is that the munificent offer of £30,000 was conveyed to Scott "through a distinguished channel, the source of which was never revealed to him, nor to me until some years after his death, and even then under conditions of secrecy."

We have, like yourself, been very much occupied with the sixth volume of Sir Walter Scott's Life ; particularly the very interesting Diary has touched us pleasingly and painfully. I cannot answer your question as to who was the munificent friend who offered the £30,000 on the failure of his affairs, but it has been supposed to be the late Lord Dudley, and it probably was him.

Shortly after the date of this letter Miss Baillie published a volume of miscellaneous verse. This included what Thomson calls "charmingly successful" alterations of the songs "Willie was a wanton wag" and "Fee him, father!" and he now asks leave to "place these two mended and much improved songs among the other beautiful songs of yours already in my musical works." He also wants to have her "most charming" song, "Wi' lang-legged Tam the bruse I tried." Miss Baillie makes him heartily welcome to all three, adding that she had written "Fee him" for Miss Head of Ashfield, Devonshire, "who has a delightful voice and taste in music. I gave her the MS. copy many years ago, and it has been sung I believe by no one else."

As for "Lang-legged Tam," she would not like to have him joined to any other music than the old air of "My Nanny, O":

It is one of those Scotch airs that may be made either plaintive or joyous as you choose to sing or play them. My song was intended for it in the last character, and Burns or Percy having written words for it suited to the former is a matter of no importance in itself, though I readily agree that there would be a confusion and awkwardness in its appearing in its joyous mood in your last volume when it has been melancholy or sentimental in the first. We shall, therefore, if you please, think no more about it.

Miss Baillie's last letter is dated March 30, 1842. She was now eighty years old, and although Jeffrey had found her at this time in "marvellous health and spirits," it was not likely that she would give herself trouble about further songs for Thomson. Nevertheless, Thomson tried her—of course without result. She says:

I am pleased that you should still suppose I have spirit enough to deal with your "auld wife" and her "wee pickle tow," but I don't feel that I have. The air is an excellent one, but who could give the proper alterations of the words better than Sir Adam<sup>1</sup> himself? Let *him* take it in hand; and if he will not, let the same skilful pen that modified "Johnnie Cope" so well of late,<sup>2</sup> be employed on the "wee pickle tow," and it will do admirably well.

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Adam Ferguson, Scott's intimate friend and companion.

<sup>2</sup> Thomson himself, who took the hint. His version of "Johnnie Cope" is inscribed to Sir Adam Ferguson.

Thomson had just published the last volume of his Scottish collection, and Miss Baillie remarks at some length upon the advantage to the work of having come out when John Wilson "has delighted the public so much by singing with his fine voice and good taste our old Scotch airs, so much neglected of late years." The applause of crowded audiences in London "will no doubt make them more popular in Edinburgh, and our country will no longer be foolish enough (I mean our Scotch ladies) to despise what belongs to itself. I am very much flattered to hear that Mr. Wilson approves of my modified versions of the old songs. They are at least more fitted for his polite and more refined hearers than they were."

Thus ends a long and interesting correspondence. The letters of Joanna Baillie are indeed, taking them as a whole, the best in the Thomson collection.

### AMELIA OPIE<sup>1</sup>

While Mrs. Opie had better qualifications for the task of song-writing than some of Thomson's other versifiers, her connection with him was not quite so

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<sup>1</sup> Amelia Opie, it will perhaps be well to remind the reader, was the wife of John Opie, the historical painter (1761-1807). Opie married her in 1798, having divorced his first wife two years before. He it was who, as she expresses it, encouraged her to become "a candidate for the pleasures, the pangs, the rewards, and the penalties of authorship."

fortunate as that of most of his workers. Samuel Parr said of her that she "combines in herself qualifications which are seldom combined in the same female. She is well-looking ; she writes well, talks well, sings well, dances well, and is altogether not only a very amiable but a very fascinating woman." These were excellent qualities. Unfortunately, as a writer Mrs. Opie's virtues were not so apparent. Miss Mitford justly complained of her slipshod tales and bad English, and although Sydney Smith could commend her for her tenderness he could find no excuse for her carelessness. In this case, therefore, it will be easy to forgive the fastidiousness of our editor.

Thomson wrote first to Mrs. Opie on the 30th of September 1803, with an introduction from Dr. Reeve ("Reeve is a good soul and deserves to be happy"), when he assures her that she is "eminently qualified to succeed in the little task" he is about to propose. He encloses six Welsh airs and asks words for them. The lady went to work on the songs at once and was able to send them off to Edinburgh on the 10th of November. She had already sent a letter to Thomson by the hands of Mr. Henry Southey, "brother to Mr. Southey the poet—a young man who will be very fortunate indeed if he finds as many friends at Edinburgh as he leaves at Norwich." In his next note Thomson remarks that "Mr. Southey appears to be a very intelligent and agreeable young man, likely to find friends everywhere," and adds that he will have much pleasure in showing him every attention in his

power. With five of the songs he is quite charmed. They are

Just what I expected from you—full of feeling and taste ; the thoughts seem perfectly natural and the language easy and elegant. I have sung them repeatedly with the music, and am delighted with their fitness for each other. The localities are happily introduced and have a good effect.

The sixth song, "Go, youth beloved," Thomson bluntly, and without reason assigned, says he does not like ; and in her next letter Mrs. Opie endeavours to interest him in it by telling him that "a conversation which took place between H. Southey and a friend of his on the eve of his departure gave rise to it, and suggested the principal idea." The song, Thomson notwithstanding, was a very good song, and is indeed one of the most popular of Mrs. Opie's lyrics. It was quoted approvingly by Sydney Smith in one of his lectures on Moral Philosophy at the Royal Institution (1804-5). Mrs. Opie, who was present, was, we are told, surprised at the unexpected compliment, all the more perhaps that Thomson had spoken so slightly of the song.

A further request for verses, made in March 1805, produced in June a couple of songs, accompanied by the following note :

After having for the last two months wished you and myself at Jericho, and after taking up the songs and your letter and laying them down again in a hopeless rage twenty times at least, this wet day of June (the 10th, I believe), having more leisure and less stupidity than



usual, I have, after writing and tearing two whole songs, manufactured the foregoing, which though not good is the best that my [word torn away] brains are capable of producing on the present occasion.

Next summer Thomson was in Wales, hunting for the national airs of the country, and wound up his holiday with a visit to London. In November he writes to Mrs. Opie expressing his regret at having missed her, and declaiming against the decree which shut up most of the celebrated picture collections against summer wanderers. "Mr. Opie obligingly gave me a line to M. des Enfants, but I could not get a peep at his treasures, so I must choose a better season for my next visit to the great world."

But Thomson did not write merely to say this. He desired to have more songs, and by way of introducing the subject he asks Mrs. Opie to accept of a muslin gown—"a specimen of Scottish manufacture for which a public premium has been awarded to the maker in a competition with others. I flatter myself," he adds, "that you will think it pretty." And she did think it pretty. It was in fact "the most beautiful muslin of the kind I ever saw; nothing can exceed or even equal the beauty of the work." Three months after it had been in her hands she was writing to Thomson: "I keep my gown for spring parties, but I fear I shall dirty it, before I wear it, with showing it." In this connection it is interesting to recall the circumstance that Mrs. Opie afterwards became a Quaker, and how she confessed to Gurney "the agony of mind" she endured at the thought of adopting the Quaker garb.

On the whole, however, she seems to have managed tolerably well to combine her love of pretty clothes with the austerities of the Friends' religion. Harriet Martineau indeed declared that there was a "spice of dandyism in the demure peculiarity of her dress." But to resume. In her letter of November 28, 1806, Mrs. Opie says :

The song of "In May I'll be here" is one of my most *effective* songs. I have sung it at masquerades, modish parties, and everywhere ; and "When will the collection to which it belongs be out?" is a question I am frequently asked. What times these are !<sup>1</sup> And what will become of us ? Every one I see looks gloomy and talks of the disasters on the Continent ; and the month of November is gloomy enough without anything from within or without to deepen its shades.

In the meantime Mrs. Opie had suffered a severe bereavement by the death of her husband, which occurred on the 9th of April 1807. On the 4th of September 1807 she writes to Thomson from her father's at Norwich, whither she had returned, to participate in what Harriet Martineau (*Autobiography*, i. 299) called the "nonsense and vanity" of society in the old Cathedral city :

I well know that I have lately been to you an object of much interest and pity, and that you must have recollected with some emotion the kind wishes for my domestic happiness with which your last letter to me concluded. They occurred to me only too forcibly, and I shall never cease to recollect the sad and strange coincidence of the

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<sup>1</sup> The long wars of the French Revolution were going on merrily.

song which preceded them,<sup>1</sup> when the blow, designed, I fear, to destroy my happiness *entirely*, was hanging over my unconscious head. But I must not write thus. I am now able to employ myself ; at least I can correct, though I can't readily compose, and am preparing a volume of poems which I have by me for the press.<sup>2</sup> . . . I have taken the liberty to enclose to you some of the proposals for printing the Lectures, and as I am desirous of doing all possible honour where honour was so much due, and derive from it some consolation, I wish to have as large a subscription as possible, and I know you will have the kindness to do all you can for me.<sup>3</sup> . . . I have been much pleased with Mrs. Grant's *Letters*, and can never forgive her for having written that exquisite song, "Roy's wife."<sup>4</sup>

Thomson having got the first volume of his Welsh songs out of hand, turned his attention to the Irish collection ; and in the summer of 1809 he writes to Mrs. Opie with a request that she would "match about a dozen of the pathetic class of airs with songs of two or three stanzas each." For these, he adds, "I would willingly give you twenty-

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<sup>1</sup> This evidently refers to some lines Thomson had quoted as a specimen of the measure for one of the airs for which he wished to have words—

Farewell ! farewell ! Eliza dear,  
The maid that I adore,  
A boding voice is in my ear—  
We meet to part no more.

<sup>2</sup> *The Warrior's Return and other Poems* was published in 1808.

<sup>3</sup> Opie's *Lectures on Painting*, with a memoir, were published by his wife in 1809. The preparation of these Lectures is supposed to have hastened his death. Thomson subscribed for three copies.

<sup>4</sup> A curious but a pardonable error. "Roy's Wife" was written, not by Mrs. Grant of the *Letters*, but by Mrs. Grant of Carron.

five guineas, or a piece of plate of that value such as you might chuse, with the privilege of publishing the songs in your own work, without music, as soon as my work is printed." Mrs. Opie agreed to write the songs and accept the guineas. Thomson's next letter to her is that from which a quotation has already been made in dealing with the Moore correspondence (see page 199). He had, as we have seen, flattered her with the opinion that she might produce songs that Moore himself would be proud to own; but compliments fell from Thomson as thickly as jests from Sancho Panza, and in this case he found that he had been somewhat too sanguine. Mrs. Opie sent him all the songs he had asked, but we hear nothing regarding them until April 1813, when he writes to her in the following outspoken fashion :

I have for some time past been employing all my leisure in re-examining the poetry of my Irish work with more particular attention than I gave to it when it first came into my hands. And I am truly concerned to say that, after considering all the songs which you was so good as to write for that work, I find very few of them that would either do credit to your name or to my publication. In frankly telling you this, I should be sincerely sorry if it gives you any uneasiness. I never would have said a word on the subject if I could have avoided it, but as the work is going to press in a week or two, and as you must soon see it, I thought you have a right to know why so few of your songs will make their appearance.

Thomson then proceeds to say that there are three of the songs which might be made passable with

some alterations, which he goes on to suggest in some detail. I may just remark in passing that in the whole of Thomson's correspondence I find only one other instance of his having told a writer that his work was absolutely bad. This was a certain Mr. Toms, of Edinburgh, whose songs were on one occasion returned to him because "they would not do credit to your name, and I must not give them to the public." It is, however, but fair to Mr. Toms to add that he succeeded in pleasing Thomson with several songs, as the collections bear witness.

To return, however, to Mrs. Opie. On the 4th of May 1813 she writes as follows from No. 15 King Street, Portman Square, having left Norwich on the very day that Thomson was addressing her from Edinburgh :

Your letter has distressed me more than I can express, and I earnestly wish that you could procure new words by some one else, as I am far from well, and not free enough in mind to give even a thought to these songs or *any* songs. A task so painful, so thankless, and so vexatious I never will undertake again, and bitterly regret having undertaken in a moment when I wanted money. And it *was* and *is* my intention to return you before I leave town the sum I retained,<sup>1</sup> not from temper or pique, but from the honest pride of a gentlewoman, who feels that she has really not *earned* the money according to her ideas of rectitude, and therefore cannot, will not, keep it. What you like of the songs you are perfectly welcome to, and I only wish for your sake they were better. But, alas ! all this is easily settled. The only

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<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Opie, as subsequently appears, had retained seventeen pounds.



difficulty is that, having involved you in this trouble, I feel bound in honour and honesty to make the songs you keep as good as I now can ; and to this, I really assure you, I feel unequal. All my leisure, and it is little, is bespoken for the work I have now in the press [*Tales of Real Life*, 3 vols., 1813], and I have no recollection of the words you allude to, nor the music. . . . I write with effort, being very unwell, having lived a round of London dissipation since I came, and am now only settled in my own lodgings. Perhaps I may be better to-morrow, and then I will try to recollect the songs and do what I can. . . . In your judgment of some of the songs, you differ from some of my friends, and one or two of the rejected ones have found favour with the world<sup>1</sup>

The poetess does not discuss the editor's "improvements" at all ; and when next she writes, in January 1815, it is to send Thomson "a draft for the seventeen pounds I owe you." "I am quite ashamed," she adds, "of having so long omitted to send you this money, but I have so many demands on my purse in various ways, that I find it not always in my power to raise seventeen pounds." A desire to see Thomson's country is then mentioned : "All I see of Scotch persons and Scotch writings, and hear of Scotch country, makes me long to visit Scotland, but it is a delight I now despair of, as I fear my father would not like my going so far from him. London is, comparatively, a short distance." Mrs. Opie managed to realise her wish in the fol-

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<sup>1</sup> The three songs which Thomson agreed to retain, with his suggested improvements, were : (1) "See ! where heaven adorning" ; (2) "The last time Dermont bade farewell" ; and (3) "This precious lock of auburn hair."



lowing year. Thomson again missed seeing her, and could only write to express the hope that she would come again. Mrs. Opie did not return to Scotland until 1834, when she visited the Highlands. She was in her seventies by this time, but the years had touched her lightly, and this visit gave her as keen enjoyment as the first, seventeen years before.

Her last letter to Thomson is dated from Norwich on the 21st of March 1815. He had asked her to make a slight change in a ballad which she had written for one of his Welsh airs. She says :

I shall be glad to alter one of the last verses of the ballad. I dislike borrowing from myself—or rather I am vexed to see that I am so *prone* to repeat myself. It may seem incredible to you, but it is a *fact* that I had not only forgotten I ever *wrote* the song in question, but that I might have *read* it without knowing it for my own. Surely I wrote it nine or ten years ago, because in 1808 I wrote a ballad published that year, and founded on a fact, which ends thus—

“She’s mine! she’s mine” he wildly cried,  
And in that throb of joy expired.

Now surely I must have written the song for you previously, as, though much sorrow might banish from my recollection a tale written *previous* to 1808, it is not likely I should repeat myself so palpably *after* 1808, when my recent ballad must have been fresh in my memory.

It is not, perhaps, really surprising that so prolific a writer as Mrs. Opie should have forgotten two such ordinary lines as those she quotes.

DAVID MACBETH MOIR<sup>1</sup> ("DELTA")

Thomson and Moir were corresponding with each other in 1830, but while "Delta's" letters exist from that date, there is no copy of any communication from Thomson until 1839. Moir writes first, from Musselburgh, on the 29th of March 1830:

I last night received your letter, enclosing the music of "Killiecrankie" and "Pinkie House," and should be most happy if it lies in my power to wed these melodies to fitting words. I will try it, but as a song-writer I confess my inexperience, and am quite aware that it requires a very peculiar talent to succeed. Most of the things set to music are verses and not songs; and Burns and Moore are still almost exclusively the only two whose compositions inform us by their spirit and texture that they were made for singing. I completely agree with you as to the absurdity of our modern fashionable fair ones pretending to give a preference to Italian airs over the rich divine old melodies of our native country. I scout the thing wherever I meet it, and have always been in the habit of doing so. Whenever I at all succeed to my mind in the pleasant task you have allotted me I will enclose the verses to you. Should there be any others that you are at a loss to dispose of and yet would like adapted to other words, you may let me try them, and should they not be to your mind, incineration is an easy process.

Meantime Thomson had come to think that "Delta's" verses, "They say that other eyes are bright," might do for "Pinkie House"; and accord-

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<sup>1</sup> Born 1798 in Musselburgh, where, as a doctor, the whole of his life was spent. Most of his writings in prose and verse appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine*.

ingly we find Moir writing on the 19th of May to say that he has "altered the objectionable line you pointed out, and rewritten the whole to make it more like a veritable song." Other alterations were suggested by the editor, Moir good-naturedly acquiescing, until the matter was finally disposed of in a fourth letter.<sup>1</sup>

When it came to making changes on songs not from his own pen, the author of *Mansie Waugh* was not so docile. It appears that the stupidly fastidious Thomson had some scruples about printing the well-known "Gin a body meet a body" in its generally accepted form. The grounds of his objection will be gathered from the following extract from one of Moir's letters :

About the alteration of a song so universally popular as "Gin a body," I know not what to say. Every line is hallowed in the public heart, whether ladies will sing about kissing or no. That such is the case, however, I am fully aware ; and if the couplet could be at all altered it would be advisable. But as all the rest of the song is unexceptionable, meddling would be a sort of profanation. After two or three trials I can make out nothing tolerable but the following :

Gin a body meet a body  
Comin' thro' the rye,  
Should a body on a body  
Gloom in passing by ?

Or—

Gloom in jinking by.

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<sup>1</sup> "I got a song for 'Pinkie House' from 'Delta' (who lives close by Pinkie), in which the localities of the scene are so happily touched that I adopted it in preference to two or three others intended for that melody, yours among the rest."—*G. T. to David Vedder, June 18, 1831.*

Against this not very brilliant "improvement" Thomson has pencilled the lines—

Gin a body like a body  
Should she pass him by?

Here is surely the very acme of Mrs. Grundyism. The ladies of Thomson's day must have been squeamish indeed if they really objected to sing the lines Thomson thus wished to replace.

The rest of Moir's letters, six in number, all deal with a new version of "God save the Queen," which Thomson had foolishly asked him to attempt. Moir showed his usual good sense in the matter, but was evidently overruled by his correspondent. He says :

From old associations it is difficult to give new verses to a great national air, and moreover here the measure is horribly namby-pamby. I have sent you three new stanzas which, with the one you intend retaining [the first], will I fancy be enough. Should you wish others, or these altered, you have only to let me know.

The new version of "The Queen's Anthem" thus called into being has of course been totally forgotten, like numerous other efforts of the same kind. Thomson, nevertheless, was "delighted with your stanzas, which are quite beautiful and appropriate."

There is a stanza for singing in time of war, if we should again be involved in that calamity. But I should be much better pleased if you would pen a suitable stanza in its room, and make the whole anthem your own, excepting the first stanza, which I think we must retain. To the war stanza I would prefix a note like this : "The following stanza refers to a state of war, which, let us hope, may not occur in our day." Or shall

we, instead of the last three words, say "during her Majesty's reign" ?

Our Lord our God arise,  
Scatter her enemies,  
And make them fall.  
Confound their politics  
Frustrate their knavish tricks, &c.

I forget the last couplet, but all the four lines are bad and unworthy of forming a tail to your verses. And I am sure if you try you will produce a far better war stanza. . . . We will show her Majesty how far Beethoven, "Delta," and their bellows-blower have outdone all England in loyal minstrelsy ! Shall I say "By D. M. Moir" or "By Delta" ?<sup>1</sup>

Many attempts have been made to improve upon the "politics" and "knavish tricks" rhyme, from the *Gentleman's Magazine* of 1745 down to the Diamond Jubilee version of Dean Hole. Moir was not quite decided about the matter. He confesses that he has "not much penchant either for the war stanzas or the peace stanzas," and thinks "that the former, as such, may be freely sunk." One remark he would make which has forcibly struck him, and it is this, "that if we retain a stanza of the old absurd anthem, and that to be the first sung, it will never be known by one in a hundred as Beethoven's or indeed anything else save the ancient use and wont." If not too late, therefore, he

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<sup>1</sup> "Poeticè I am better known as 'Delta' than D. M. Moir,—but as some literary swindlers in the London periodicals have more than once assumed my *nom-de-guerre*, it is surer work to note it as I now subscribe myself, ever yours most truly, D. M. Moir (Delta)."—*Letter to Thomson, July 19, 1839.*

“would sink it altogether, and retain not a rag of the old habiliments.”

But Thomson was determined to have the war and peace stanzas, and so, “to render the lyric more complete,” Moir yielded to him on this point also. A “Birthday” stanza was another of his suggestions, but Moir demurred to that—“the adjurations for such a theme being incorporated in the first as well as in parts of the other stanzas.” Thus ended one more futile attempt to supplant what Mr. W. S. Gilbert calls “our illiterate national anthem.” Thomson published Moir’s verses as a finale to the sixth volume of his Scottish collection. Whether her Majesty took any notice of the “bellows-blower’s loyal minstrelsy” (Thomson said he was sending her a copy of the volume) we have no means of telling.

#### DAVID VEDDER<sup>1</sup>

“Say what you will and think as you may, our names will as surely go down to posterity *associated*, as will yours and Robert Burns’. This is my only comfort under every apparent slight which I meet in the course of my pilgrimage.” Thus wrote David Vedder to Thomson in 1833. And who now remembers David Vedder? Certainly the Orkney

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<sup>1</sup> David Vedder was a native of Orkney. He began life as a sailor, and was subsequently employed in the revenue service. He published several poetical works, wrote, among other things, a memoir of Scott, and contributed extensively to periodical literature. He died in Edinburgh in February 1854, in his sixty-fourth year.



poet did make a persistent bid for immortality. He tells Hogg in 1832 that "with an education little better than your own, and with hard labour for my portion until my twenty-fifth year, it has been my ambition all my life to do something to distinguish myself in literature, and though I may never soar, no man shall say but I have made an effort." No man who reads the poet's letters to Thomson will ever be likely to gainsay the effort; the letters are full of efforts—poetical efforts, that is—with, alas! but very little of achievement. Indeed the letters are much better, as a rule, than the verse which accompanies them.

In Vedder's collected poems, published in 1842, there are six songs which, as we are informed in a note, "have been set to music, with symphonies and accompaniments, and published in Mr. George Thomson's Scotch melodies." The correspondence between Thomson and the poet is mainly concerned with these songs, for the editor's habitual fault-finding involved something like four letters to each production.

The first song about which we hear is a version of "Cam' ye by Athole?" Thomson seems to have asked for this when he learned from Hogg (see the letter of August 15, 1829) that the Shepherd's well-known lyric would not be available. Vedder coolly opens with Hogg's first verse, but afterwards substitutes for that the stanza beginning, "Cam' ye by Athole, Donald MacGillavray," not so much, perhaps, "from having the fear of Mr. Hogg before mine eyes, as to have the song com-

plete of my own writing." The rhymes in Hogg's stanza and chorus are, moreover, in his opinion, "miserably deficient." In fact, "there are no rhymes at all in it. Who would think of rhyming 'Gary' to 'Charlie'? And the first and third lines of his chorus are mere repetitions."

Vedder's song originally contained the following lines, which agreed with Thomson as little as they would have agreed with the tune :

Down to the dust with the proud Hanoverian,  
 Sabre the Whigs and the Hessian cravens ;  
 Renegade Lowland loon, prim Presbyterian,  
 Give their bones to the gibbet, their flesh to the ravens.

This presently gave place to lines "as soft as new potatoes at the Assembly's dinner, and which an Anti-Burgher lady might sing on a Saturday evening, even if the ruling elder had been to tea with her. The dear, demure, bright-eyed Whigs shall not have their nerves hurt." And so the song was finished to Thomson's satisfaction. "It is," said he, "a fine spirited effusion, and in days o' lang syne would have set the Jacobites red wud [mad], though they were pretty well 'on' without it." Nevertheless, it has not displaced Hogg's "miserable" rhymes and "mere repetitions."

In sending the song, "Robin is my joy, my dear," Vedder indulges in some sharp criticism of the old version, inquiring "how in the name of Apollo" the fine air came to be "married to such doggerel." The original version of the song ("simple, natural, and tender" is how Thomson describes it) differs in

many little details from that printed in Vedder's volume of 1842. The last stanza has been entirely deleted, it is hardly necessary to say, at the suggestion of Thomson, who will not take "The glamour o' my Robin's mou'" (not a felicitous expression certainly), because "our young ladies would not sing it." Nor will he have the following :

Then patiently I'll bide my time,  
Anticipating joys sublime,  
When Rab and I attain our prime,  
He wha for aye will loe me.

"We must accommodate our verses to the tastes of readers," says Thomson, "or we print in vain." Therefore, in deference to "our young ladies," the above must be sacrificed. It is "with reluctance" that he troubles his correspondent with so many suggested alterations, but he has "been obliged to go through this process with three-fourths of the many songs that have been written for my national melodies."

After this, it probably did not greatly surprise Vedder when Thomson proposed to him that he should make a substitute "for a rather free stanza in a most beautiful song of Burns." The "free stanza" was the last of "Blooming Nelly" ("On a bank of flowers, in a summer day"), which the interested reader may look up for himself. Let us see what Vedder has to say in reference to it. It will be noticed that he makes no objection to the proposed meddling with the poet.

With regard to the last stanza of "On a bank of flowers," I find it impossible to improve the last four lines

of the stanza and retain the first four. So therefore the whole eight lines must be lopped off the song and a new stanza written besides. It is the more necessary, as it looks rather daft-like for a lassie to run like a wild hare into the wood for *protection* when she ought rather to have run to the nearest cottage. There is also a pithy Scottish adage which bears me out, namely, "Fleyrs wad hae followers." Ramsay has the same idea in "Fye! gae rub her o'er wi' strae." His heroine rins awa' and "hides hersel' in some dark nooks." But what of that? Her laugh will lead you to the place "where lies the happiness you want." Now, I maintain that both the one and the other contain double meanings, and consequently [are] unfit for the drawing-room. Here is my notion of how the song should end :

With trembling limbs and flutt'ring breast,  
 The beauteous maid awoke ;  
 And morning ne'er on mountain crest,  
 With half the splendour broke.  
 But love sat throned in Willie's eye,  
 And honour breathed in every sigh ;  
 She, void of guile, vouchsafed a smile  
 Which empires could not buy.

Or—

The maid meanwhile vouchsafed a smile  
 Which kingdoms could not buy.

I fondly hope this new stanza will enable the ladies to warble one of the finest lyrics in existence.

Thomson did not give the ladies a chance, although it seems to have taken him some time to make up his mind about the questionable character of his proceeding. Writing to Vedder, he says :

Your proposed concluding stanza for "Nelly" is very clever, but you take away too much of the charming

original. We dare not touch the simile of the partridge ; 'twould be deemed sacrilegious. There is a good reason for some changes on the last four lines of the song, but not for meddling with the first four [of the last stanza]. On my pillow the other morning I thought of turning the stanza as follows :

As flies the partridge from the brake,  
     On fear-inspired wings,  
 So Nelly, starting half-awake,  
     Away affrighted springs.  
 But Willie soon stood by her side,  
     For Cupid is a speedy guide ;  
 He vow'd, he pray'd, he found the maid  
     Content to be his bride.

But whether I ought to venture upon this alteration, slight as it is, I really am not sure.

The final decision is recorded on the outside of Vedder's letter : " On mature consideration I decide that we must not, dare not, alter the original. G. T." How far Vedder influenced this conclusion may be guessed from the following, written in reply to the above :

. . . Now for "Nelly." Will you pardon me if I speak my mind ? I know you will. Then be it known to you, on the faith and honour of a versifier, your amendment will never do. Boreas with his blasts, Neptune with his waves, Venus with her smiles, Diana with her staghounds, Minerva with her wisdom, and (above all) Cupid with his darts have all been laid in the Red Sea by that great conjuror Taste and the concurrence of mankind generally ; and who may invoke them or allude to them with impunity ?—None. Moreover, when we select an individual to guide us anywhere, we do not so

much care for a "speedy" guide as a safe one. Now all the namby-pambyists, from Elkanah Settle<sup>1</sup> downwards, have agreed that there is not a more dangerous personage in existence than this same Cupid. Then, though he may be speedy he is not safe; *ergo* should not be trusted. Now then there is nothing under heaven more tame than "Content to be his bride." So all things considered, 'tis better to let it remain on the borders of *double entendre* than substitute anything tame. Were I to receive £1000 for writing a stanza that would please me better, I would give it up in despair. It completely pleased myself, and on my solemn oath that is very seldom the case. . . . Perhaps you may reconsider the matter. I would not be so scrupulous with the partridge simile. Besides, 'tis in tens of thousands of books, and cannot be lost.

This is the last that we hear about "Nelly." But it is not the last that we hear about Vedder's laying hands on Burns. In 1838 he writes to Thomson: "I hope I have altered 'Lovely Polly Stewart' in such a way as would have pleased Burns himself had he been at my elbow. I deem that I have used exactly such expressions as he would have done had he for a moment thought his words too warm. But he was the child of passion, and did not well know how to chasten down his luxurious imagination." One can only admire the daring impudence of these manglers and meddlers. Thomson himself did some incredible things in the way of altering Burns to suit his own whimsical notions. He tells this same Vedder that the "O" at the end of the lines in "Green grow the rushes, O" is

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<sup>1</sup> A minor playwright, remembered only for the ridicule heaped on him by Dryden and Pope.



"entirely unnecessary, and to me disagreeable," and therefore in singing the song he always cuts off the "O"! The effect must have been as tame as his proposed ending of "Nelly," but Thomson actually *prints* the song in that way!

The letters which follow for a considerable time are mostly taken up with a song for the old air of "Aikendrum," for which Allan Cunningham later on furnished words ("A wooer came to our toun"). Vedder ultimately wrote for this melody the lyric beginning "The gloaming star is gleaming," which Thomson calls "a song of sweets, nicely culled and happily displayed." At first the poet "found it exceedingly difficult to hit on anything like originality," so much having been said and sung about "Aikendrum," and he simply put the old character into the new guise of a warlock. The result did not satisfy Thomson, and he frankly said so. "I confess I should like you to pen something of a higher grade and greater polish for the music of 'Aikendrum,'" says he. Thereupon Vedder flies into a tantrum, remarking that "if the song does not suit *you* there are many who will be glad of it." Thomson was at his old objections to the Doric again:

There are some broad-cast words of the Scottish country kitchen which, though found in some of our old songs, should never appear in new ones. Such to me are "chaumer," "coggie," "loof"; and you may rely on it that the colloquial phraseology of low persons is quite unsuitable to the lyrics of the present day. The four last lines would not be amiss if they were rid of the "coggie." . . . I spell the word "And" not "An'," be-

cause I do not like to see English words disfigured for the purpose of Scottifying them.

In another letter he harps on the same string. Two songs of Vedder's he has not used, because they are written in broad Scotch, which "our fair countrywomen never hear except from their menials. It is every day losing ground, even among ourselves." Young people are "positively taught to consider it vulgar, and, being thus discouraged from speaking in the broad native dialect, feel no inclination to sing it. Poets therefore who *now* write songs would do well to write pure English if they expect to be sung." Reading between the lines, we may here note that Thomson recognised the bad taste of his age in its depreciation of the native dialect, but felt that it was not for him, indeed, that it would be useless for any one, to attempt to correct it. The day of the "kailyarders" was not yet.

There is no further letter until August 1833, when Vedder writes to express his regret that Thomson on various visits to Dundee, where the poet was then stationed, had never called to see him. His great desire was to have "some conversation with you on a theme which, I will be bold to say, *we* know as much about, nay *more*, than any other two human beings, viz. Scottish song." Vedder had clearly no need to pray for a "guid conceit" of himself.

A song for the air of "Sae merry as we hae been" was written in 1837. It passed through the fire of Thomson's criticism, emerging after the

process much as it now stands. Thomson told his correspondent that he had "a great hankering kindness" for the first verse of the old version, both "on account of its pleasing simplicity and some auld lang syne recollections of hearing it sweetly and repeatedly sung by those who have long ceased to charm the ear and eye." Indeed, he would never have thought of disturbing the opening stanza "if the 'fors' and 'dids' had not made part of it," and he is for keeping "as near to the original as is consistent with good taste."

For the air of "Todlin' hame" Vedder wrote the song of "My ain fireside," which, as he boasts to Thomson, is drawn from his own experience. In his letter acknowledging the receipt of "this little gem," we have the first indication that payment was made to the poet by Thomson, a sum of two pounds being enclosed as "a small token of gratitude for the favour." A subsequent letter shows, however, that this was the second time Vedder had received the same amount.

There is nothing of further interest in the correspondence, unless it be some references to a poetical "Epistle" addressed to Thomson by Vedder. The sailor poet clearly had a genuine regard for Thomson and a sincere wish to be of use to him. Twice before this he had offered to "write up" the editor and his collections in the *Edinburgh Literary Gazette*, and other journals with which he was connected. Nothing seems to have come of *that* suggestion, perhaps for a very good reason: Vedder was not himself to pen the tribute; Thomson was to

be the author ; Vedder was to "stand godfather for every word of it, copy it in my own hand, and return you the MS. to be burnt." Such was the manner in which he proposed to "sound a trumpet before you and give you greetings in the market-place." The "Epistle" was, however, a fair and square production. This panegyric, which appears with a long note<sup>1</sup> in the collected works, was first printed in the *London and Edinburgh Magazine*, then edited, as Vedder tells us, by "a Scotsman, a scholar, and a man of genius." It is of no merit, but perhaps in a Life of Thomson it should find a place. Here it is :

### EPISTLE TO GEORGE THOMSON, ESQ.

THE FAR-FAMED CORRESPONDENT OF ROBERT BURNS

Ten thousand thanks, dear friend of mine,  
For "Johnie Cope," that braw propine ;  
I'll drink your health in "blude-red wine,"

Just after dinner,  
Wi' a' the honours, nine times nine,  
As I'm a sinner.

Good men an' true, their country's boast,  
Whose names are known from coast to coast,  
Shall join me in the grateful toast,  
And loud applaud you,  
While I sit a delighted host,  
To hear them laud you.

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<sup>1</sup> The "note" is practically a paraphrase of Thomson's account of himself and his work which he furnished to R. Chambers for *The Land of Burns*. "Possessing a clear head and a vigorous intellect," says the writer, "the venerable gentleman to whom the above verses

By faith an' filial fondness led on,  
 I love the very ground ye tread on,  
 An' pray for benisons your head on,  
     Here an' hereafter ;—  
 Auld Scotland mourns wi' sable weed on,  
     Sin' ye hae left her.<sup>1</sup>

For, ah ! ye roamed her wide domains,  
 Her broomy haughs an' flowery plains,  
 Her dreary dells an' mountain chains,  
     Fatigue defying,  
 An' married her immortal strains  
     To verse undying.

Far from the busy, noisy throng,  
 Ye sought, the Border dales among,  
 The HIERARCH of Scottish song,  
     So famed in story,  
 An' while time's river rolls along,  
     Ye'll share his glory.

With kindred souls that would not palter,  
 With faith that could not flinch nor falter,  
 Ye took an oath at Friendship's altar,  
     Within Truth's portal,  
 An' now, like Shakespeare an' Sir Walter,  
     Ye're both immortal.

May hope and peace, and love and joy,  
 Like stars, illumine your evening sky ;  
 May countless blessings from on high  
     Your steps attend,  
 With heaving breast and moistened eye  
     So prays your friend.

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are addressed has recently composed an excellent narrative-ballad on the flight of that mirror of recreant knights, Sir John Cope, at the patriarchal age of 82 ! His zeal and assiduity in the cause of Scottish music and song seem to increase with increasing years."

<sup>1</sup> This was written while Thomson was temporarily resident in London.

Now for the correspondence on this glowing eulogium. Vedder, writing to Thomson in May 1841, says :

I have had the "Epistle" printed, with a copious notice of your musical life—what you have done and what you are doing for the music of auld Scotland. I have likewise couched a lance at some of your detractors, and have quoted Robert Chambers' eloquent and pungent defence of your character from his *Land of Burns*. None shall touch you with impunity while I live and possess the exercise of my mental faculties, and when you and I and Chambers shall be mingled with the clods of the valley, some generous spirit will assuredly arise who will send a Congreve rocket in the midst of the circle of dullards who would be mean enough to kick the dead lion.

Vedder's images, it may be observed, are sufficiently audacious and varied. Thomson was not without a fair share of self-esteem, but this and the "Epistle" were too much for him. He writes :

You may believe that I feel most truly grateful to you for such a marked proof of your friendship and good opinion as I find in the "Epistle," and in the note by which it is accompanied. But I assure you, my worthy correspondent, that you have exalted me far above my poor deserts. 'Tis perfectly true that I roamed and pored and wrote much more than any one out of my own family knows in search of all that is valuable and really deserving of preservation in our national melodies and songs, as well as in the acquisition of new songs for the many unprovided or miserably ill-provided melodies which I found. This I have done with enthusiasm, and I flatter myself it will be acknowledged by all real judges



of music and poetry who closely examine the collection I have made. Thus far I do honestly think I have deserved well of the lovers of the delightful sister arts, and feel myself not unworthy of your kind praise. Farther, however, your partiality of kind friendship should not carry you. You must not place me on a pedestal I am unworthy to occupy, as you have done in the sixth verse of your panegyric. If it is not printed off, I most earnestly beseech you to have it expunged. Burns may be placed as near the summit of Parnassus as you please. He is worthy of Shakespeare's and Milton's society, and Sir Walter may perhaps be admitted to make up the immortal quartet. But, my dear sir, you must not indeed associate my humble name with that of Sir Walter, by which your judgment would be impeached and laughed at. For God's sake, then, get the sixth verse cancelled, whatever you do.

Before Vedder received this protest and appeal the "Epistle" had been "printed off and dispersed to the four winds," so that it only remained for him to defend himself as best he could. He wrote his "Epistle" from the worthiest of motives; it was "a kind of safety-valve for an outburst of pent-up affection." It was sent in manuscript to Robert Chambers, who "declared it good," and Chambers "is one upon whose judgment I would rely more than upon that of any other living man."<sup>1</sup> As for the coupling of Thomson's name with the name of Burns, that was inevitable: Burns will be known to "the latest posterity," and just as surely will

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<sup>1</sup> Vedder's youngest daughter was engaged in the family of Robert Chambers "as preceptress of his daughters." His eldest daughter, he says in 1841, "teaches the pianoforte, but I am sorry to say her scholars are somewhat like angels' visits."

the name of George Thomson go along with his. "You would have been highly respectable, and would have deserved well of your country had you never corresponded with Burns. But it is the association of your names that will make *yours* fresh and green a thousand years hence." And so Thomson's scruples were removed: at any rate we may presume that they were, for there is no further mention of the matter in the correspondence, and Thomson was still living when the objectionable sixth verse was printed in the panegyrist's collected poems.

Vedder had evidently all along the greatest pleasure in his work for Thomson. "As for the songs," he says in one letter, "I have had more delight in composing them than in perhaps any of my literary undertakings;" and when it comes to the last of his commissions he "feels excessively sorry to be compelled to bid farewell to the pains and pleasures of writing for you."

## WILLIAM TENNANT

There are several letters from the author of *Anster Fair*, but only two addressed to him by Thomson. The first of Thomson's letters was written in July 1816, when Tennant was teaching at Dunino, near Anstruther. Tennant had applied for the office of House Governor at Heriot's Hospital, and Thomson had been using his influence in pro-

moting his interests. The application was unsuccessful, and Thomson, in returning the candidate's letters and certificates, thought to soften the disappointment by asking him to try his hand on some songs for his collection. "I conceive," says he, "that if you were to set about it you must succeed, and I should feel peculiar pleasure to [*sic*] usher in your name among the lyric poets in my concluding volume, now in preparation. . . . I am sure you can be eccentric, novel, and natural, and these are qualities which are sure to please."

Tennant evidently took his disappointment philosophically, for we find Thomson writing to him on the 13th of August (1816):

I am happy to learn that you are not only a poet but a philosopher, characters that are very rarely united, and I conceive that in your cottage on the muir, blessed with habits of temperance and study, and with the inspiring visits of the muse, you enjoy such a measure of happiness as seldom falls to the lot of the peer in his palace. Your poetical renown, I am certain, must spread itself every day in proportion as the world gets acquainted with *Auster Fair*, which deserves much warmer praise and a higher rank than it has obtained even from the *Edinburgh Review*. I have again read it with inexpressible delight and additional surprise; for you have scattered the richest flowers of poesy and the finest strokes of humour with an unsparing hand, feeling, no doubt, that you have a mine of diamonds which you are in no fear of exhausting.

Tennant, it appears from this letter, "consented to invoke the muse for a few lyrics," but there is no further correspondence on either side, until

we come to the first of Tennant's letters in 1834. From a letter of Sir Alexander Boswell to Thomson, dated London, March 26, 1817, we learn something of an early disappointment of Tennant's not mentioned by his biographers :

I have this day the unpleasant duty of informing Mr. Tennant that he has failed in his application for the Professorship. I made application to Lord Melville, but strong interest had been at work, and although there has been [*sic*] very strong exertions for rival candidates, both have concurred in soliciting that, let the decision end as it may, they trust that the choice may not fall on Mr. Tennant. This of course you will not communicate to him, but his personal defects<sup>1</sup> had been urged, I found, from some quarter, and never having seen him, I could not speak concerning them. I confess I think the step was bold. To get the school of Lasswade I thought an object, yet he has not had it six months when he aims at a Professorship of Oriental languages. Lord Melville told me that though he could not promote his views at present from the recommendations he had received, he should be happy to be of use to him on another occasion.

Tennant had been preferred to Lasswade in 1816 by the good offices of Thomson; and in 1819 he was appointed teacher of classical and Oriental languages in Dollar Institution. Here he remained until 1835, when, through the influence of Lord Jeffrey, he succeeded the Rev. Dr. Scott, as Professor of Oriental languages at St.

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<sup>1</sup> Boswell must mean physical defects. Tennant was never able to walk without the help of crutches.

Mary's College, St. Andrews. As David Vedder had it—

They placed him in a grave Professor's chair  
Who sang in jocund strains the joys of Anster Fair.

The two letters to Thomson which follow are in connection with Tennant's candidature for this post. The first is dated 5th October 1834 :

I have to-day transmitted to Mr. M'Laren of the *Scotsman* testimonials necessary to be handed to the Lord Advocate. In case he (Mr. M'Laren) should be from home, and they by mistake should be allowed to lie on his table, I think it right to apprise you also, my dear sir, of this circumstance, that, if you find time, you may call at Mr. M'Laren's, George Street, and learn whether he is at home to receive them. A copy of the pamphlet on the Psalms should be also lying on Mr. M'Laren's table, to be handed in also with these testimonials. . . . If you find time you may read the certificates. I regret not having Dr. Jamieson's. I wrote to him on the subject, but he is somewhere in the country, and I know not if my letter has reached him.

The second letter is dated 8th December 1834. Thomson has written on it in pencil : "The warrant is ready to be stamped ; fees £9, 3s. 6d."

I have just received a letter from St. Andrews intimating that I am appointed Oriental Professor in St. Andrews, but that owing to the cessation of business in the public offices consequent on the change of Ministers, the patent, though made out and signed, has not been transmitted. I am directed to employ some solicitor in London in obtaining it from the Home Department Office on paying the usual fees, &c. Now,

though I have met Mr. Richardson, a respectable solicitor there, and know something of Scot, Mr. James Nairn's brother-in-law, yet I am not sure of their addresses, nor indeed know if it may lie in their way to perform such a service. I have therefore bethought myself of addressing you on the subject, with a wish that you, knowing, as you certainly must do, some respectable solicitor in London, may write to him desiring him to call at the Home Office for patent lying written out and sealed, to pay the necessary fees, and to forward it to me, when I shall make a remittance to him of the charges. . . .

I must thank you, my dear sir, for the warm interest and earnest exertions on your part for procuring me this respectable appointment. From first to last, indeed, your kindly endeavours to effect my promotion, from my first going to Lasswade to this last advance, have been so conspicuous, and I may add so successful, that I should indeed sin against the kindest Benevolence were I to overlook or forget your ever-to-be-valued attentions.

After this we have nothing further from Tennant until the following letter of May 11, 1847. Thomson himself, it should be premised, had written a "Sequel to bonnie Maggie Lauder, no longer now a widow." Maggie Lauder was, of course, the heroine of *Anster Fair*.

After such a long cessation of correspondence, I am happy once more to see your well-known handwriting. It is nearly the same as when I corresponded with you thirty-three years ago, only a little more open and expanded. I am glad to hear that you experience, though nearly a nonagenarian, such good, firm health, and that you find pleasure in returning to your old pursuits and delights. Although I have been long separated from



you, yet I have been wont frequently to recall you to my recollections as one to whom I have been under deep obligations; nor have I ceased by frequent inquiries at friends to ascertain your well-being and your diversified whereabouts.

As to the query you are pleased to direct to me regarding four verses of the old song of "Maggie Lauder," it is certain that by many vocalists and male auditors they have been understood to contain a *double entendre*. I do not believe, however, that this double way of interpreting is perceived by all hearers; you yourself are an example; and by fair dames and ladies I cannot persuade myself that it is observed at all. Indeed, when twenty-six years ago I amused myself with this merry theme—and which I took up in sport merely, to amuse and give some quaint celebrity to our town [Anstruther]—I wished within myself that this loose and undesirable way of interpreting the old song should grow into desuetude; or if that should not take place, that this same old song itself should be thrown into shade, neglected, annihilated, or forgotten. This you may perhaps say was most Gothic, cruel, and barbarous. There is nothing, so far as I am aware, in *Anster Fair* which is adapted to this sinister interpretation. So that if this same song of Semple's cannot be separated from its exceptionable way of being "ta'en up," I have frequently longed and still long that some new song could be, by some worthy, composed, suitable to our modest and respectable view of the characters described. Yesterday I tried my hand. But you know song-writing is not my *forte*. Nevertheless I send it you for your perusal. With your own verses I am pleased; only it would not do—it would be a sad anachronism—to introduce my name as having an existence anterior to the subject and personage I myself describe, and from which my muse, being Momus' daughter, derives her small celebrity as a mirth-maker. You will notice that I have

incorporated into my verses several of your lines, which I hope you will pardon, approve, and ratify.

Tennant gives his "new song" on a separate sheet as follows :

## MAGGIE LAUDER,

*Written for the Tune, by W. T., 1847.*

## 1.

O Rob the Ranter's gane to Fife !  
 He'd dreme'd a dreme but lately,  
 That bade him, gin he'd hae a wife,  
 Gang there, for there his fate lay.  
 Wi' birr he bang'd his bag-pipe up ;  
 He busk'd him nice and neatly ;  
 And o'er the sea, in pinnace, he  
 Comes sailin' slow and stately.

## 2.

He keek'd into Kirkaldy town,  
 Nae dame was there him fittin' ;  
 He speer'd at Dysart's smeeky town,  
 Not there his weird was written ;  
 At Largo and at Pittenweem,  
 Still was his soul unsmitten ;  
 But when he cam' to Anster town,  
 Lo ! there was Beauty sittin' !

## 3.

In our East-Green, she sat the Queen,  
 And Bonny Meg they ca'd her ;  
 Rob saw wi' glee, the witchin' e'e,  
 He kent his Maggie Lauder ;  
 He garr'd his bag-pipe sound a skirl,  
 Folk ne'er wi' mirth were madder ;  
 The Town scarce thol'd the dinsom dirl ;  
 He charm'd his Maggie Lauder.

## 4.

So she caught him and he caught her,  
 The tane bewitch'd the tither ;  
 'Twas Music, wi' her gowden clasp,  
 Knit baith their hearts together ;  
 They're King and Queen of our East-Green,  
 Fair Meg and Rob the Ranter ;  
 Now, syn the marriage-knot is ty'd,  
 Each well may be a vaunter.

## 5.

But Anster town, wi' feast and fun,  
 Rung o'er their Maggie Lauder ;  
 Nae kingdom, on a king's birthday,  
 E'er cantier was or gladder ;  
 They danced, they sang, man, bairn, and dame,  
 Up to the skies did vaunt her ;  
 But aye wi' hers they join'd the name  
 Of famous Rob the Ranter.

## OTHER CORRESPONDENTS

It must not be supposed that the foregoing absolutely exhausts the Thomson correspondence. With one exception, it exhausts the correspondence in so far as both sides are represented by extant letters ; but Thomson's letter-books are crowded with communications to versifiers of whom we have as yet heard nothing—to some versifiers, indeed, whose names are totally unknown to the present day. There was SOUTHEY, for example. A copy of a letter addressed to him at "Greeta Hall, Nr. Keswick," appears among the correspondence of 1803. Thomson must, however, have seen some reason for not sending the communication at that

time, for there is again a copy of a first letter in August 1812. By that date "most of the great poets of the time"—so our editor declared—had contributed to enrich the Thomson collections, and Thomson had "long regretted that it does not yet boast of your name." When he reads "any of your poems and sees what a muse of fire attends your invocation," he "cannot help being anxiously desirous" that the poet should honour the concluding volume with two or three songs. For these, should the poet consent to write them, he will "be very glad to pay whatever you are pleased to demand." He knew Mr. Southey's brother when he was in Edinburgh, and he feels sure that he will support the request he now makes.

There are no letters of Southey in existence to tell what he did or attempted to do in the matter. But Thomson himself has removed all doubt in a letter of May 16, 1824, to Professor Smyth. Southey, says he, "after trying to write a song or two for me gave it up in despair, declaring that he could positively write a poem as long as *Thalaba* with more ease than a song! I have reason to believe that he was earnest in his endeavours to write the songs." That Southey could not write songs evidently surprised Thomson as much as it surprised Hogg to find that the Laureate was a water-drinker.

SAMUEL ROGERS was applied to in 1803, when Thomson was working on his Welsh collection. There is no need by this time to say in what manner

he was addressed. "The admirable specimens which you have given at the end of your precious little volume," says Thomson, "satisfy me that there is not a poet living to whom I could more properly apply, and I should really feel inexpressible satisfaction if you would invoke the muse for three, four, or half-a-dozen songs. You cannot be indifferent to the idea of your verses being sung for ever by your lovely countrywomen to their favourite melodies." Whether he was indifferent or not we have no means of knowing. There are no letters of Rogers extant, but he consented to write, and in November 1805 Thomson acknowledges the receipt of his "Sleeping Beauty" ("Sleep on and dream of heaven a while"), with which he is "much delighted since she received your finishing touches." He wants another song from "your truly elegant pen," and encloses our old friend, the air called "The Sheriff's Fancy," which however did not take the poet's fancy. Later on, in November 1812, Thomson again asked for a song, this time to the tune of "The Fox's Sleep," but as that air was furnished with words by the never-failing Professor Smyth, we may take it that Rogers declined to make an attempt.

There is a copy of one letter to "MONK" LEWIS, dated February 1804, but only the complimentary introduction need be quoted. "Few," says Thomson, advising Lewis about a couple of airs for which words are wanted, "few can touch those tender chords which are here required with such a delicate

and masterly hand as yourself. Witness 'Nannie,' 'The Felon,' and 'The Gaoler,' set by Miss Abrams. These, the latter particularly, have delighted me beyond expression, and indeed have tempted me to renew my application to you." Lewis wrote several songs for the collections, but there are no letters of his extant.

With ALLAN CUNNINGHAM a long correspondence was conducted which, however, is of no general interest. Indeed, the only point worth noting in connection with his name is the dissatisfaction which Thomson constantly expresses with "his manner of dealing with Burns' songs in his edition of the poet's works." He has "placed the poet's pure gold in contact with rusty old brass, degrading the most lovely songs that ever were written by placing on the same pages with them the poor doggerel rhymes of a rude age long since excluded from decent society, and wholly unworthy of being rescued from oblivion." It is "most injudicious and a great sin against good taste." Nor was this the sole cause of complaint against Cunningham.

I cannot help feeling much greater regret at his having published, as Burns', a song which I am thoroughly persuaded he was utterly incapable of inditing, and which is quite beneath his talents. It is introduced in Cunningham's fifth volume of the poet's works (p. 312), where it is thrust in altogether out of place among the exquisite songs which the poet wrote for my work, and which all other editors have published in an unbroken series, as in Dr. Currie's edition. It is just such a song as Robespierre or some one of the monsters of his bloody committee



would have written, and as unlike the kindly benevolent disposition of Burns as vice is to virtue. 'Tis a disgusting effusion that I never saw nor heard of till I met with it in the volume above mentioned. . . . Burns a preacher of assassination ! Away with the foul libel so alien to the kindness of his nature and generous heart.

This burst of indignation is all on account of the lines beginning, "Why should we idly waste our prime." Thomson breaks out vehemently in another letter to Robert Chambers on the same subject. "The name of Burns would be disgraced by the effusion. If any man had sent it to me with the strongest assurances of its authenticity, I would have rejected the information, and put the verses in the fire." Thomson here proved a far more discerning critic than he usually showed himself to be.

TO MRS. HUNTER a large number of letters are addressed by Thomson, all full of petty details about her songs, in which he found "so much ease and grace and beauty." Here is one short extract :

It is not the first time that your muse and Haydn's have met, as we see from the beautiful canzonets. Would he had been directed by you about the words to *The Creation* ! It is lamentable to see such divine music joined with such miserable broken English. He [Haydn] wrote me lately that in three years, by the performance of *The Creation* and *Seasons* at Vienna, 40,000 florins had been raised for the poor families of musicians.

The words of *The Creation* are poor enough in all conscience ; but it was only a trick of Thomson's to

flatter Mrs. Hunter with the notion that she was capable of furnishing an oratorio libretto. As it was, her name would "descend with that of Haydn to the latest posterity." And perhaps it will, if we think only of "My mother bids me bind my hair." Mrs. Hunter, it may be added, was on terms of close intimacy with Haydn, who was often her guest while in London.

Professor WILLIAM SMYTH of Cambridge has frequently been incidentally referred to in preceding pages. There are something like seventy letters addressed by him to Thomson, with hardly a single quotable sentence among them. Smyth is a long-winded letter-writer, and has really nothing to say but about his own songs. Of these he certainly furnished a remarkable number for the various Thomson collections. Thomson describes him as having been "another Burns" to him, and declares that without his "powerful and most friendly aid" he could never have finished his collections to his own satisfaction. Smyth contributed all his songs gratuitously, but Thomson frequently sent him presents of books. In 1818 he sent *Waverley*, *Guy Mannering*, and *The Antiquary*, and promised "all the tales to come by the same author." The "tales" duly followed, but there are no remarks upon any of them worth quoting.

The following letter of April 19, 1845, is from Captain CHARLES GRAY, an enthusiast in Scottish

song, like Thomson himself. The letter sufficiently explains itself :

11 ARCHIBALD PLACE, EDINBURGH,  
*April 19, 1845.*

My DEAR SIR,—It would have given me pleasure to have complied with your request on demand, but I have no other jolly song which would exactly suit the measure. There is one in my volume, to the air of "Willie brewed a peck o' maut," consisting of four stanzas which, if I could cut down to two or three and invent a new chorus for it, perhaps it might pass. But, in my opinion, it is far inferior to my "Blithe, blithe," &c. This is the best song that I ever wrote, or am likely to write, and I regret exceedingly that you struck out one of the very best stanzas in it. The time I sung it in the company of Colonel W. W. Burns, he said, with more than his usual animation, "Well, Captain Gray, your song is worthy of taking its place beside my father's 'Barley bree,'" the very highest compliment which could be paid to me. It is worth your while to consider, then, whether you should give a correct version of my song in your work. Further, I have made one or two emendations in it latterly, which I think will warrant this ; but that you may be enabled to judge of them, I shall send an amended copy along with this. The alteration in the chorus I take to be a great improvement, as well as the fourth line in the last stanza. If you still think it will not do as a whole, I may try to cobble up my other song, but it will never bear a comparison with the "Social Cup." As soon as I can lay my hand upon a printed copy of the song in praise of "Vernon," I shall send it to be conveyed to your young friend.—I am, my dear Sir, yours very truly,

CHARLES GRAY.

*P.S.*—I send, as Byron hath it, my "last new poem." When it made its appearance, some of my friends called it my "Second Epistle General to Peter." The sequel,

however, is the most melancholy thing that ever came under my own observation. On Tuesday, 15th inst., I followed Mrs. M'Leod—no insincere mourner, I trust—to her last abode, aged 26, and not four months married. Alas! and woe is me.

C. G.

I send some other scraps, having gone beyond a penny stamp.

RICHARD LLWYD, "the bard of Snowdon," was another of Thomson's helpers to whom several letters are addressed. In 1805 Thomson sends him a present of a portrait of Burns, "as you are thought to be like the poet." HECTOR MACNEILL (who roused the Tartar in Thomson by disparaging the songs of Burns), WILLIAM S. ROSCOE of Liverpool, JOHN RICHARDSON, the friend of Thomas Campbell, Dr. LATHAM of Cork, PATRICK FRASER TYTLER, Sir WILLIAM FORBES, THOMAS PRINGLE, CHANCEY HARE TOWNSEND,—these and others were among the correspondents of Thomson, of whom it is unnecessary to say anything here.

## CORRESPONDENCE ABOUT THE MUSIC

### IGNAZ JOSEPH PLEYEL

PLEYEL was Thomson's first Apollo, to use his own term. He had studied under Haydn, who considered him his dearest and most efficient pupil; and the two met in what outsiders believed would be a professional competition in London in 1791. There was, however, no question of rivalry between the composers themselves. Writing from the metropolis, Haydn says: "Since his arrival [Dec. 23, 1791] Pleyel has been so modest to me that my old affection has revived; we are often together, and it does him honour to find that he knows the worth of his old father [*i.e.* of Haydn himself]. We shall each take our share of success and go home satisfied." Pleyel had certainly every reason to be satisfied with his visit, which was both a pecuniary and an artistic success. Unluckily when he returned to the Continent (he was organist at Strassburg) he found himself denounced as an enemy to the Republic, and was forced to fly.

How and when Thomson first communicated with him, it is impossible to say, but it must have been about this time that he wrote. There

is nothing extant of the correspondence except a couple of short notes dated 29th January and 18th February 1793, showing that the sum of £131, 5s. had been paid to Pleyel by Thomson for six sonatas and for symphonies and accompaniments to thirty-two Scottish songs. Thomson received the six sonatas and published them in due course. A "spurious work, a wretched imitation" of these, was afterwards published by Dale, a London music-seller, and Thomson frequently cautions his correspondents and the public against the "gross imposition."

Thomson appears to have had some difficulty with Pleyel, the exact nature of which cannot now be determined. When he comes to open negotiations with Kozeluch, he is very particular about having a stamped agreement from that composer; and in asking an intermediary to arrange about this, he says in a letter dated February 6, 1797 :

The reason of my wishing particularly that a formal written agreement should be entered into immediately after the terms are settled, is that I have been juggled, disappointed, and grossly deceived by an eminent musical composer with whom I entered into an agreement some years ago, which he has only fulfilled in part, after putting me to a world of trouble and expense. As he is resident in France, I have no means at present of procuring any redress or satisfaction from him. These musicians are generally very incorrect in business and eccentric in their conduct, so that it is the more necessary to be on one's guard in a transaction of this kind.

Of course I am only presuming that the reference here is to Pleyel; but the presumption amounts



almost to a certainty. The phrase "fulfilled in part" cannot be made to apply to any other composer "resident in France" with whom Thomson is known to have had dealings. And yet it is curious to find Thomson writing in 1801 to Kozeluch asking that composer to "help out" a rather meagre accompaniment of Pleyel's, "because I cannot get at Pleyel himself, since no communication is allowed between this country and France." Nevertheless it was possible enough for Thomson to act the part of the dissembler in a matter of this kind; and his "getting" at Pleyel might have been for a very different purpose from that which he pretended to Kozeluch.

In any case Pleyel ceased to write for Thomson. The latter would no doubt have applied at once to Haydn, but for the idea that Haydn occupied much too lofty a position to be concerned with work of this kind. The appearance of William Napier's collection undeceived him in that particular; but meantime he had pledged himself to certain commissions in favour of Kozeluch.

### KOZELUCH

And who was Kozeluch? Born in Bohemia in 1753, Leopold Kozeluch became known in England as a composer in 1785 by "the neat and accurate execution" of Mdlle. Paradies, the blind performer on the harpsichord. In 1792 he succeeded Mozart—to whom he behaved in a most discreditable manner—

as court composer to Leopold II., and that post he retained until his death in 1811. His music, once well known, is now entirely forgotten.

The correspondence with Kozeluch is in some respects rather diverting. It was conducted mainly through Mr. Straton, a friend of Thomson's who was at this time Secretary of the Legation at Vienna, although the editor frequently ventured upon a letter in French, sent direct to the composer. Kozeluch usually answered through Straton, but there are one or two notes from him to Thomson, all very brief and all in French. The correspondence opens with a letter from Thomson, dated February 6, 1797. In this letter he desires to engage Kozeluch to compose six or twelve sonatas for the piano, as well as symphonies and accompaniments for some sixty or seventy Scottish airs which he proposes to send. The sonatas are to have an obligato accompaniment for the violin and an accompaniment *ad libitum* for the 'cello, and Scottish airs are to be introduced in every case in one or other of the movements. The question of terms is discussed in an accompanying letter to Straton. Thomson says :

I do not know the general price which M. Kozeluch is accustomed to receive for his sonatas. I have been told from five to seven guineas each. If he made a greater demand, however, I would even comply with it to such an extent as you may learn is commonly given for his compositions of the kind. For the symphonies and accompaniments to be added to the Scottish songs, his trouble will be so small that his price should

not exceed half a guinea, or fifteen shillings at most, for each of the songs. Still I leave you discretionary power.

From the draft agreement which I find among Thomson's papers, I learn that Kozeluch's terms were four hundred ducats for the twelve sonatas and a hundred ducats for seventy songs, which, in the case of the sonatas, comes out at a good deal more than Thomson anticipated. Thomson does not fail to tell the composer this. Yet, as he "wishes to have the work done in a style of as great excellence as possible—in short, that it should be a *chef-d'œuvre*," he resolves not to ask him to lower his terms.

As a matter of fact, Thomson purchased only six sonatas from Kozeluch. In 1801, when the composer informed him that he had other three almost ready, he wrote to say that "the six already published have had a very limited circulation"; and although at this date he seems to have been willing to abide by the terms of his draft agreement, which covenanted for twelve sonatas, I do not find that he ever paid for more than six.

The agreement to which I have referred is a portentous document, occupying nearly four pages of foolscap. Terms and dates are set down in great detail, and each party is to bind himself to pay an indemnity of one hundred ducats to the other party who shall fail to carry out the agreement. Kozeluch would have nothing to do with such a formal document, and here the difficulties

begin. On the 1st of June 1797 Mr. Straton writes to Thomson :

I have had several conversations with M. Kozeluch, in the course of which I am sorry to say that I perceived an extreme reluctance on his part to enter into any legal agreement whatsoever. This he manifested by starting a variety of objections to a contract in any form, save that of a promissory letter to you, which were—or at least appeared to me to be—equally ill-founded and devoid of candour. To bring the matter to an issue, there therefore remained no other method of proceeding than to draw up and send to M. Kozeluch a sketch of what I thought consistent with your wishes, and calculated to meet his. The annexed paper is that which I sent to him, with a request that he would have it copied and executed in a proper manner. But, instead of complying with this request, he sent back the paper to me this morning in its present state, with a verbal message purporting that he had nothing more to add.

There is no trace of this document among the Thomson papers, which is a pity in view of certain “extraordinary marginal annotations” referred to by Straton. The latter had indeed no little trouble with Kozeluch over this and other matters connected with his commission. On the 29th of July (1797) he writes to say that he had read Thomson’s draft agreement to the composer, who had promised to return it properly signed, but he had not kept his word, in spite of repeated reminders. “Those musical geniuses are strange ones indeed,” is Mr. Straton’s despairing exclamation. M. Kozeluch was to give him still more trouble.

On the 16th of August he informs Thomson that

Kozeluch declares his inability to go on with the Scotch airs, "owing to the very faulty manner in which the music has been copied." The luckless secretary had attempted to argue the question of the improbability of mistakes, when the composer fairly floored him by "entering into a discussion of so scientific a nature as far to outstrip my musical knowledge." Thomson, however, set to work upon fresh copies of the airs. On the 18th of September he writes to Straton that it has cost him a fortnight's labour to make new copies of the sixty-four songs he now sends. "I have," he adds, "bestowed such particular care and attention on every one of this number as to be *certain* they are perfectly what they ought to be. If Mr. Kozeluch should still find any little defects in some of the modulations he must impute such to the peculiar nature of the compositions and make as much of them as he can.'

Here was, in fact, the explanation of Kozeluch's fancied slips of the copyist: he was entirely ignorant of the peculiar characteristics of Scottish national music, and set down to error what he could not account for by the ordinary rules of art. Mr. Straton was acute enough to see this. Writing to Thomson on the 28th of October, after delivering the fresh copies to Kozeluch, he says:

I am apt to imagine that the copy of those which you first sent was perfectly accurate, for Kozeluch called on me yesterday to mention that on perusing the airs lately put into his hands, he had found most of them *une musique barbare*, which set at defiance all the rules of art

that he professed, and that therefore he did not think it worth while to add symphonies, &c., to them. In reply to this, I read to him your letter of the 18th September again, and being entirely of Arbuthnot's opinion in regard to M. Kozeluch's intellect, instead of standing up for our national music thus wantonly attacked, I left it burthened with the epithet of "barbarous," and, courtier-like, told M. Kozeluch that you relied on his knowledge and genius for the civilisation of the part of it which you had transmitted hither. I added that you would naturally be desirous of seeing a specimen of it in its new garb; and M. Kozeluch having, by an extraordinary exertion of his mental faculties, fathomed the meaning of my observation, sent me this morning the enclosed paper.<sup>1</sup>

A large number of letters now follow from Thomson, either to Kozeluch, himself or to Mr. Straton, but few of these letters contain anything of interest. In February 1798 Thomson pays the composer one hundred ducats for his arrangements of sixty-four airs, Kozeluch declining to part with the MSS. until he has received the money. On the 27th of May Thomson asks his price for "twelve pieces for the pianoforte for beginners, composed by you in a new manner"; but on subsequent consideration he declines to purchase these compositions, and arranges with his friend Mr. Preston, the London music-seller, to buy them for 150 ducats. In October he tells Kozeluch that he cannot afford to give him more than one hundred ducats for sixty-four airs, and if he does not choose to accept these terms, there is an end of the matter. On the 15th of November

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<sup>1</sup> The "enclosed paper" is not extant.



he writes to acknowledge the receipt of the aforementioned six sonatas :

They are most admirably composed. The fancy, the spirit, the taste which you have displayed throughout the whole, and particularly in working upon the Scottish subjects, entitle you to the highest praise. I never heard any music more brilliant in the *allegros*, or more charmingly expressive in the cantabile parts.

As for the accompaniments to the songs, they are "perfectly delightful." Thomson likes them more and more every time he hears them. And yet, as it appears, he had actually presumed to alter some of these accompaniments ! In 1799 he tells Kozeluch that "I have taken the liberty in a very few instances to simplify your pianoforte accompaniment a little." But the fastidious editor either got tired of doing this, or, as is more likely, Kozeluch objected to the procedure ; and next year, that is to say in 1800, we have the first of quite a little sheaf of letters about the simplifying business. At first Kozeluch yielded to the constant requests for the retouching of his MSS., but as time went on he became less agreeable. Writing to Straton on January 10, 1801, in reference to the matter, Thomson says :

I have demonstrated the necessity of it [*i.e.* of revision and simplification] in the strongest terms ; but if a little of your eloquence be also necessary, I am persuaded it will not be wanting. Perhaps Fries' [the Vienna bankers] arguments may be more prevailing than either yours or mine ; if so, they must, no doubt, be employed, though I really think they have said enough already. Kozeluch

should consider it his duty to do at last what I represented to be an essential requisite at the first. Had he attended to my original representation in regard to the songs, I would not only have saved a very considerable expense, but what I have felt much more, the loss of much precious time and indescribable trouble.

The fault was really Thomson's own in going for help to one who so little understood the characteristics and requirements of Scottish national melody. But this by the way. Mr. Straton is again the medium of our learning how Kozeluch took the above. On the 3rd of February (1801) he sends to Thomson what the latter calls "a rude epistle" of Kozeluch's (unfortunately it is not now in existence), accompanied by some comments of his own. He says :

I fancy it will not be requisite to trouble you with a repetition of the arguments which the nature of the subject could not but suggest to me, in opposition to his penning so extraordinary an epistle. Suffice it to say that they, however pointed in themselves and forcibly directed, were not tantamount to force a passage through the fated armour which encompasses our friend's intellect. To my representations I received answers of gigantic absurdity, and had the mortification to perceive that the more I endeavoured to fight the battle on the principles and within the sphere of common sense, the greater did he extend the line of tangent at which he had quitted it. In short, *c'est une mauvaise tête.*

Thomson replied to Kozeluch in a strongly worded letter of 21st February. He was "never more surprised nor more hurt than by reading the very extraordinary letter" which the composer had sent

him. His sole reason for asking that the accompaniments be made less difficult was "that the people in this country will not look at any other but a simple and easy accompaniment to their national songs"; and he imagined that what Kozeluch could do with so much ease to himself, he would have an actual pleasure in doing, "especially as I offered to pay for it." This appeal—for Thomson ended with an appeal—was made to deaf ears. Kozeluch emphatically declined to retouch further any of his accompaniments. To quote Mr. Straton:

He strenuously maintained that they were perfect, and that those who advised you to require of him to alter them were evil counsellors, who wished to spoil your work, and to detract from his reputation. I argued the point with him for some time, then opened a battery on his vanity, but to no purpose. The thickness of his skull baffled the efforts of reason to make an impression on his brain, nor would his tympanum resound to its proper place the appeal which I made to his *amour propre*.

Thus ends the Kozeluch correspondence, so far as it is worth quoting from. The composer continued to do some work for Thomson—he was engaged on the Welsh and Irish as well as the Scottish airs—down to about 1809, but by that time Beethoven was beginning to take all that Thomson had to give.

## HAYDN

Haydn was Thomson's first love, although not his first Apollo. Thomson confessed in his later years that he owed to him "innumerable happy hours of my long life." A composer like Haydn, he says in 1811, "never before existed and probably never will be surpassed." In 1846 he tells Moscheles that such is his debt of gratitude to the master that he would erect a statue to him at his own expense were he a man of fortune; as it is he must content himself with subscribing five guineas to the fund being raised for that purpose. He is "the inimitable Haydn," the "unsurpassed and unrivalled genius of the realms of music," the "delectable," the "father of us all"; and so on. On the other hand, Haydn was proud of the work that he did for Thomson. "I boast of this work," he said, "and by it I flatter myself my name will live in Scotland many years after my death." In a letter of July 1816 to Professor Smyth, Thomson records "a curious circumstance" which was communicated to him by Radicati, "the husband of the fine singer Mdme. Bertinetti, who lived at Vienna when Haydn was employed on my Scottish melodies. Haydn, he said, was so proud of the symphonies and accompaniments which he composed for my melodies as to have the little original score of each framed and hung all over the walls of his bedroom." No wonder Thomson loved "the dear old man"!

The story of Haydn's connection with Thomson is not a long one. It is told in outline by the editor himself in a letter to a correspondent. He says :

My first application to Haydn was upon the 30th October 1799, when I sent him part of the Scottish melodies, which in the following summer he returned united to his admirable symphonies and accompaniments. And from that time we continued in correspondence till the year 1804, when I received the last of his many precious compositions. I wrote him in 1805 with more national airs. My letter, perhaps, was miscarried, for I received no answer, and therefore in June 1806 I despatched a duplicate of it which was returned to me by my banker in London in consequence of information from his correspondent at Vienna that Haydn could not compose any more owing to illness. In 1808, having heard that he was restored to health, I wrote him once more with part of my Irish melodies, in the hope of his composing ritornelles and accompaniments to them, but I received no answer ; and therefore sometime after I sent those melodies to Beethoven, worthy in all respects to be the successor of Haydn.

Haydn, as we already know, had been employed in connection with the collection of William Napier, so that the work which he was now to undertake for Thomson was not new to him. Later on, too (in 1802-3), he harmonised and wrote accompaniments for a number of Scottish airs, for which he received five hundred florins from Whyte of Edinburgh. Thus, if he did not succeed, it was not because he was without experience and practice.

Thomson, then, addressed his first letter to Haydn in 1799. There is no copy of it, but there

is a copy of a letter to Mr. Straton of the Kozeluch correspondence, who was to deliver the letter to the composer and negotiate with him on Thomson's behalf. Straton was to "say whatever you conceive is likely to produce compliance," and if necessary was to offer a few more ducats for each air. But Haydn "must not speak of what he gets." Thomson does not expect that Haydn will do the accompaniments better than Kozeluch; "that is scarcely possible" (!); but in the symphonies he will be "great and original." Thomson had offered two ducats for each air; Mr. Straton writes to say that Haydn "seemed desirous of having rather more than two ducats, but did not precisely insist upon this point." Straton adds, as a result of the interview, that "upon the whole he appears to be a rational animal, whereas all that can be said of the other (I mean Kozeluch) is that he is a biped without feathers." On the 19th of June 1800 Straton sends thirty-two airs which Haydn has just finished. They would have been done sooner, but "poor Haydn laboured under so severe an illness during the course of this spring that we were not altogether devoid of alarm in regard to his recovery."

Thomson now sent sixteen more airs; and Straton writes (April 30, 1801) that Haydn at first refused to touch them because the price paid was too low. But in the course of conversation Straton learnt that Haydn was writing to Thomson to ask him to procure a dozen India handkerchiefs, and it struck him that "your making him a *present* of them might mollify the veteran into compliance respecting the



sixteen airs." Straton therefore took upon himself to promise in Thomson's name that the handkerchiefs would be sent as a gift, and "this had the desired effect to such a degree that Haydn immediately put the sixteen airs in his pocket, and is to compose the accompaniments as soon as possible on the same terms as the former."

The handkerchiefs duly arrived—"nice and large"—and Haydn sent his thanks in appropriate terms. At the same time (in January 1802) he wrote: "I send you with this the favourite air 'The blue bells of Scotland,' and I should like that this little air should be engraved all alone and dedicated in my name as a little complimentary gift to the renowned Mrs. Jordan, whom, without having the honour of knowing, I esteem extremely for her great virtue and reputation." Mrs. Jordan is said to have composed the air of "The blue bells of Scotland," which in any case she popularised by her singing. She was in Edinburgh in 1786—"being," as the theatre bill had it, "her first appearance in this kingdom."

After this there came a little hitch to which Thomson makes no reference. In 1802 Haydn had been asked by Whyte to do some work for his collection. He consented, and Thomson naturally felt hurt. He made his complaint through Mr. Straton's successor at the Embassy, Mr. Charles Stuart. In August 1803 Stuart writes to say that he had broached the matter to Haydn "in as delicate terms as possible for fear he might take offence." Haydn admitted that he had done the

accompaniments for Whyte, but said the airs were quite different from those he had done for Thomson. After "a long conversation, he informed me," says Mr. Stuart, "that being now 74 years of age and extremely infirm he found himself wholly incapable of farther application to study; that he must therefore beg leave to decline all offers whether on your part or from any other person whatsoever. He even declared that notwithstanding the repeated requests of Prince Esterhazy, he felt himself utterly incapable of finishing several pieces of music he had undertaken, and being possessed of a competency he desired nothing so much as to pass the short time he has yet to live in repose and quiet." From this letter we learn that Thomson had unluckily sent a present of a handkerchief for Frau Haydn, who had been dead for three years! Haydn subsequently informs Thomson that he has handed the gift to "a married lady who has much merit with regard to music."

In spite of the little misunderstanding just referred to, Haydn was brought round once more, and on the 20th of December 1803 we find Thomson sending twenty-four airs, "which will most certainly be the last." Haydn's work delights him so much that he "really cannot bear the idea of seeking an inferior composer to finish a work already so nearly finished by you." He would pay four ducats for each air rather than have the mortification of a refusal. After this there is really nothing of interest to note in the correspondence; unless it be a very "previous" letter of condolence which Thomson

sent to Vienna. A false rumour had reached him that Haydn was dead. The following extract from a note which Haydn dictated to be sent to the person who received Thomson's letter will explain the matter :

Kindly say to Mr. Thomson that Haydn is very sensible of the distress that the news of his alleged death has caused him, and that this sign of affection has added, if that is possible, to the esteem and friendship he will always entertain for Mr. Thomson. You will notice that he has put his name and the date on the sheet of music to give better proof that he is still on this nether world. He begs you at the same time to be kind enough to have Mr. Thomson's letter of condolence copied and to send him the copy.

The handkerchief to the dead Frau Haydn was an awkward enough affair, in all conscience, but it was nothing to this. Perhaps, however, Haydn may have been like Lord Brougham, who spread a false report of his own death in order to see what would be said about him.

Haydn furnished in all some two hundred and thirty-two airs with symphonies and accompaniments for Thomson. In the packet of letters from Haydn, tied up by Thomson himself, he has placed a slip of paper giving the various payments he had made to the composer. According to this statement Haydn had £291, 18s. for his work from first to last—not by any means an insignificant amount to make out of a side branch of his art.

## BEETHOVEN

"I live only in my music . . . letter-writing was never my *forte*." Such was Beethoven's own admission, and those who read his letters to Thomson will certainly find in them no cause for disputing the assertion. For the majority of non-musical people—and for not a few hard-worked musicians as well—the main interest of the correspondence now to be dealt with will probably lie in the composer's hard-headed insistence upon a fitting remuneration for his work. To him, as Thackeray put it to Baron Tauchnitz when the latter craved excuses for his bad English, a letter enclosing £ s. d. was always "in pretty style"; and there is nothing to show that he shared with Haydn that artist-like antipathy to pecuniary concerns which led the composer of *The Creation* to deplore his having to work for pay. These letters furnish, indeed, a striking commentary on the story told of Beethoven that, while lying ill before his death, he tried to read Scott, and could not enjoy the author because he "wrote for money." As a matter of fact both Scott and Beethoven "wrote for money," with this difference only, that Scott—at the outset at any rate—wrote for the luxuries, while Beethoven wrote for the necessities of life. And herein is an important distinction. For it would be unjust to Beethoven not to remember, while reading this correspondence, the peculiarly difficult circumstances in which

he was placed at the time, and in fact throughout his whole life.

The son of wretchedly poor parents, he was himself in a chronic state of poverty. His deafness, which had begun to give him serious trouble three years before Thomson first sought his aid, prevented him from taking pupils, and if it had not, his temper and eccentricities would as surely have prevented pupils from taking him. He could not make money as a public performer, nor could he accept engagements as a conductor. Thus, almost the only source of revenue left to him was his compositions ("My whole income," he wrote in 1815, "is derived from my works"); and composition, which even now pays only when concessions are made to the public taste, in Beethoven's day seldom paid at all. It is true that a trio of rich nobles had settled on the composer an annual allowance of £400, but this was not until 1809; and moreover the excessive issue of bank notes had so depreciated the value of money that the nominal £400 did not really amount to more than £210. Nor must we forget—what is indeed referred to more than once in the letters—that the war with Napoleon, in straitening the finances of the country, had laid upon artists, in common with all their compatriots, pecuniary burdens unusually heavy and distressing. This fully explains the readiness of Beethoven to accept Thomson's proposals—a readiness which, judging from what we otherwise know of the composer's character, and even from what we may read between the lines of his letters, was in other circumstances little to be expected. As



it was, Thomson's payments must have been of very material assistance to Beethoven, small as he in some cases considered them. At the lowest estimate he can hardly have received less than £600 for his share in the various publications, while it is not by any means certain that he did not make something out of the same works when issued in Germany. No doubt he gave full artistic value for the payments made to him; and however much it may be regretted that the Scottish songs, as George Hogarth affirmed, no more than covered their cost, it is impossible to believe that Beethoven was overpaid.

The first of the Beethoven letters is dated from Vienna, October 5, 1803. At this time the composer was in his thirty-third year, but he had as yet done nothing very remarkable, with the exception of his first symphony, produced in the year 1800, and his first great choral work, *The Mount of Olives*, performed in this same 1803. So recently as 1794 he had been taking lessons from Haydn, whom he was now to supplant with Thomson, and his individuality had hardly had time to assert itself. But he was undoubtedly the "coming man," and Thomson had too keen an eye for coming men to miss the chance of securing his services for the Edinburgh collection. Thomson had written to him on the 5th of July, suggesting the composition of some sonatas based upon Scottish airs, of the same kind as those already supplied to him by Pleyel and Kozeluch. Beethoven, as will be seen from the following letter, agreed to prepare the



sonatas; but, as the peculiarly national character of the compositions would practically limit their sale to the United Kingdom, he was obliged to put a price upon them to which Thomson could not accede, and the matter eventually fell through, after several attempts to arrange it.

VIENNA, 5th October 1803.

DEAR SIR,—I received with much pleasure your letter of the 5th July. I concur readily with your proposals, and beg to inform you that I am prepared to compose for you six sonatas of the kind you desire, introducing the Scotch airs in a manner which the Scottish nation will find in the highest degree favourable and in keeping with the genius of its songs. As to the remuneration, I think that 300 ducats<sup>1</sup> for the six sonatas will not be too much, seeing that in Germany I get that sum for the same number of sonatas, though in that case without accompaniment. At the same time, I must tell you that you will do well to come to an early decision, for so many engagements are being proposed to me that before very long I shall perhaps not be in a position to comply immediately with your request. . . . Having a genuine liking for Scotch airs, I shall take peculiar pleasure in the composition of these sonatas, and I venture to go the length of saying that, if the remuneration meets your views, you will be abundantly satisfied.—Yours, &c.,

LOUIS VAN BEETHOVEN.

Thomson having replied that the remuneration did *not* meet his views—that in fact he could offer only half the sum asked for—the correspondence with

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<sup>1</sup> It will be convenient to estimate the value of the ducat as equal to 10s. of our money. In these letters a halving of the number of ducats will thus give the amount in pounds sterling.

Beethoven seems to have dropped for a time. It was resumed in 1806, when certain alternative proposals were made to the composer. Writing from Vienna on the 1st of November, in reply to a letter of Thomson's dated July 1, Beethoven says :

I hasten to send you my remarks and decisions on the proposals you were good enough to make to me. In doing so, I shall use all the frankness and explicitness I myself like in business matters, for this alone prevents complaints on either side. This, then, is what I have to say :

(1). I am by no means disinclined to fall in with your proposals as a whole.

(2). I shall do my best to make the compositions easy and pleasing, so far as that is possible and in keeping with that elevation and originality of style which you yourself acknowledge are the distinguishing marks of my works, and in which I shall never come short.

(3). I cannot undertake to write for the flute, that instrument being too limited and imperfect.

(4). In order to give more variety to the compositions you are to publish, and to secure for myself a freer field in those compositions (which to make *easy* is a task that will always be cramping to me), I will only promise you three trios for violin, alto, and 'cello, and three quintets for two violins, two altos, and 'cello. Instead of the other three trios and three quintets, I will give you three quartets, and, finally, two sonatas for the piano-forte, with accompaniment for two violins, and one quintet. I would beg you, in short, as regards the second volume of compositions you wish, to rely entirely on my taste and loyalty, and I assure you that you will be quite satisfied. However, if this modification is not agreeable to you, I have no wish to obstinately insist on it.

Beethoven then goes on to say that he desires the second volume of compositions to be published six months after the first, and asks for a "clearer statement" in regard to Thomson's injunction that no copy printed on the Continent should be introduced into Great Britain. This was a very necessary caution; for, as Beethoven remarks, if Thomson agreed to the publication of these works in Germany and France, it is not easy to see how the composer was to prevent copies from being brought to England. Later on, Thomson rather injudiciously hinted a suspicion that Beethoven might not observe his compact not to publish in Germany until six months after English publication. "You are wrong," says Beethoven, writing on July 20, 1811, "you are wrong in giving expression to any distrust; I am capable of respecting my word of honour, and I assure you that I shall not entrust one of my compositions to a single soul until the expiration of the time agreed upon." Beethoven remarkably resembled Carlyle in the broad features of his temperament, and particularly in the rugged vigour of his utterances, which makes the mildness of this protest against aspersions on his honour the more surprising. Continuing the letter of 1806 from which the above quotation is made, Beethoven arrives at the all-important question of terms:

Lastly, as regards the remuneration, I understand that you offer me £100 in British money, or 200 ducats of Vienna (in cash, and not in notes of the Bank of Vienna,

which, in the present crisis,<sup>1</sup> are too depreciated in value for that sum, paid in these notes, to be in the least proportionate to the work that I shall devote to you, and the remuneration that I receive for all my other compositions). In fact, the remuneration of 200 ducats in cash will not pay me too well for all that the satisfaction of your wishes entails.

After this there are explicit instructions as to when and how the cash should be transmitted by Thomson, and a request for a "definitive agreement" in the event of the latter falling in with the terms and other suggestions of the letter. A postscript may be quoted in full :

I am still willing to meet your wishes as regards harmonising some little Scotch airs, and I await on that matter a more explicit proposal, knowing, as I do, that Mr. Haydn has had £1 of British money for each air. You will notify me at the same time about the date on which each volume will be published by you, so that I may arrange accordingly with the publishers who will issue the same compositions in Germany and France.

Here we have the first indication of Thomson's having proposed to Beethoven that he should undertake the arrangement of Scottish airs for his collection. Up to this time Haydn had been doing most of the work ; but he, as we have seen, was chafing under what he considered Thomson's niggardliness in regard to pay, and was conscious besides that his powers were failing. It was clear

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<sup>1</sup> This, like similar references in subsequent letters, alludes, of course, to the hostilities with the French.

that somebody must perforce soon take his place, and Beethoven's star being manifestly in the ascendant, Thomson very naturally courted the new luminary, under whose light all others were beginning to pale. But, as we shall see, Thomson had always considerable difficulty in persuading Beethoven to shine exactly in accordance with his conditions. The above letter, as will have been noted, was written in 1806, and it is not until 1809 that we again hear of the matter. On the 23rd of November of that year Beethoven writes :

I will compose the ritornelli [*i.e.* the introductory and concluding symphonies] for the 43 little airs, but I ask £10 sterling or 20 ducats of Vienna in cash, more than you have offered ; thus, instead of £50 sterling or 100 ducats of Vienna in cash, I ask £60 sterling or 120 ducats of Vienna in cash. This work is furthermore one that gives little pleasure to the artist ; nevertheless, I shall always be ready to do it for you, knowing that it has some utility in a business point of view. As to the quintets and the three sonatas, I find the remuneration too little for me. I ask the sum of £120 sterling or 240 ducats of Vienna in cash. You offered me £60 sterling, and it is impossible for me to give you satisfaction for such a remuneration (we are living here in a time when terribly high prices are asked for everything ; we are paying about three times what we used to pay) ; but if you agree to the sum I ask, I will serve you with pleasure. . . . Be assured, sir, that you are dealing with a true artist, who loves to be honourably paid, but who has a still greater love for the glory of art, and who is never satisfied with himself, but is ever trying to take steps forward, and to make great and continual progress in his art. As to the songs, I have already begun them,



and I will give them in about a week to Fries [the Vienna Banking-House]. . . .

*P.S.*—Once again, I beg you to send me the words of the songs, as they are very necessary if one is to give the proper expression.

Beethoven was evidently not at first aware that Thomson was procuring new words as well as new accompaniments for his airs. More than once he insists on the necessity of having the words before him if his work is to turn out successfully. In a letter of 20th July 1811 he remarks that without the words "one is not in a position to satisfy connoisseurs, or to compose an accompaniment worthy of a good poem"; and on the 29th of February 1812 he is so emphatic on the point that he threatens to cease work entirely unless his wishes in the matter are complied with. "I cannot comprehend," he says to Thomson, "why you, a connoisseur, are not able to understand that I should produce utterly different compositions if I had the words at hand; and the songs cannot possibly turn out perfect productions unless you send me the words; and you will compel me in the end to decline your further commissions." It was in answer to this protest that Thomson informed him that the words were as yet hidden in the brain of the poet; and it is perhaps a little strange that Beethoven never once remarks on the matter again. From his whole attitude it is clear that there was no lack of conscientiousness about his work for Thomson. It might, indeed, be work that gave "little pleasure to the artist," but at least it would be done in an



artistic manner if it was to be done at all. It is, of course, doubtful whether he could have fully caught the spirit, felt as it were the aroma, of the songs in a Scottish form. He could not read English, much less Scots, and it is a commonplace that under the hand of even the best of translators poetry loses its fine individual flavour. But it is derogatory to the artistic temperament to suppose that if the words had been merely read to him and then translated he would not have got some suggestion from both sound and sense.

On the 10th of July 1810 Beethoven is able to send Thomson the Scottish airs, which, he observes, "I have composed *con amore*, with the wish to give a mark of my esteem to the Scotch and English nation by doing homage to their national songs." After some technical details of no general interest he continues :

I should be very glad to have the words of these Scotch airs, to use them in Germany when you have published them in Scotland ; you might even send them to me now ; I would have them translated and await the news of the publication in Scotland. Please send me the words placed under the simple melody. As to the 3 quartets and 3 sonatas, I accept your proposals, and hope that they will be to your entire satisfaction. You could pay me the £120 sterling or the 240 ducats in cash in two instalments, half when I deliver the 3 quartets and the other half when I deliver the 3 sonatas, or *vice versâ*. As regards the airs with English words I will do them at a very low figure, to prove how ready I am to serve you : that is why I only ask £20 sterling or 40 ducats in cash for these airs. I could not compose them at a lower figure without loss, for they give me here more

for a dozen airs with German words, which give me no difficulty in respect of the language, whereas I have to get the English words translated, and to pay special heed to the pronunciation, and all that is a constant harassment.

A letter of July 20, 1811, is of considerable length, and, as usual, a great part of it is devoted to the eternal question of terms. Reference is more than once made to "the state of our finances" as affected by "the unhappy crisis in which we are living." At this time there was indeed a temporary lull in the hostilities, but Beethoven's position does not seem to have been in any way improved, for we find him more exacting than ever in the matter of payment. The Finance Patent, it should be remembered, appeared in Austria in 1811, by which the value of money was depreciated by a fifth.

For the future it will be very agreeable to me to work for you, but having regard to the unhappy crisis in which we are living, and the great losses I have already suffered through my reliance on your countrymen, it is an essential condition that you will be good enough to instruct the firm of Fries & Co. to receive my compositions on your behalf in return for payment in full. Without that, I cannot undertake your commissions. . . . With regard to the offer of 100 ducats in gold for the 3 sonatas, I say that I will accept them to please you, and I am also ready to compose 3 quintets for you for 100 ducats in gold; but as to the 12 songs with English words, the price fixed is 60 ducats in gold. For the cantata on the Battle in the Baltic Sea I ask 50 ducats [in a subsequent letter (February 29, 1812) the price is raised to 60 ducats]; but on condition that the libretto is not an invective against the Danes; if the contrary is the fact, I cannot

take it in hand. . . . I shall not fail to show you ere long my arrangements of my symphonies, and I will undertake with pleasure the composition of an oratorio, provided that the words are of a noble and distinguished cast, and that the remuneration of 600 ducats in gold is agreeable to you.

It is a matter of great regret that this excellent suggestion of a setting of Campbell's "Battle of the Baltic" was destined to bear no fruit. That poem, apart altogether from its intrinsic merits as poetry, has all the qualities that go to the making of a first-rate libretto; and as Beethoven's particular scruples in regard to its offencelessness towards the Danes are not violated, there is no reason in the nature of things why he should not have produced a masterpiece of choral ballad. Sir George Grove, in remarking on Beethoven's sketch-books, draws an instructive parallel between the methods of great masters in different arts. In the first draft of Campbell's poem, the opening lines ran thus—

Of Nelson and the North sing the day,  
When their haughty powers to vex,  
He engaged the Danish decks,  
And with twenty floating wrecks  
Crowned the fray.

Certainly no outline sketch of Beethoven's can have contained less promise of perfection in the finished work than this.

Thomson's enthusiasm must (for this once at least) have got the better of his judgment when he proposed an oratorio to Beethoven. The cantata, on a patriotic theme of great contemporary

interest, might perhaps have succeeded, but oratorio at any rate was quite out of line with his principal labours, the collection of national melody; and if the composer's price had been much less, Thomson must inevitably have been out of pocket by the commission. Whether anything but inability to agree upon the terms disappointed us of both cantata and oratorio it is impossible now to say. In regard to the latter, Thomson never went so far as to negotiate for a text, and so far as oratorio is concerned, Beethoven stands represented by the single work known as *The Mount of Olives*, already mentioned. It is worth noting once more how very exacting the composer was in the matter of words for musical setting. Here they are to be "of a noble and distinguished cast," and the stipulation is emphasised in a subsequent letter, when, in again stating his readiness to undertake an oratorio, he says, "it is necessary that the libretto should be particularly well done."

Beethoven had a fixed idea that Thomson was not dealing so generously by him as he had formerly dealt by Haydn. In a letter dated 29th February 1812, he begins by pleading for an additional ducat for each air, and then goes on:

Haydn himself assures me that he has received four ducats for each air, notwithstanding that he wrote for harpsichord and violin alone, without either symphonies or a part for the 'cello. As to M. Kozeluch, who gives you a song with accompaniment for two ducats, I offer my warm congratulations to you and the English and Scotch audiences when they hear it! I consider myself,

I confess, a cut above M. Kozeluch (*miserabilis*!) at this sort of thing, and I do trust that you have some discrimination which will enable you to do me justice.

After this characteristic but, for him, restrained expression of his opinion of a contemporary, Beethoven goes on to ask for explicit instructions in regard to the arrangement of airs he still has in hand, and concludes :

We want gold badly here, for our Empire is at the present moment a source of paper money only ; and I in particular need it, for I may possibly leave this country and go to England,<sup>1</sup> and then to Edinburgh in Scotland, where I should be delighted to make your personal acquaintance.

This letter did not reach Thomson until early in December of the same year. The political disturbances on the Continent rendered transport particularly hazardous and uncertain, and letters and packages from Vienna actually reached England by way of Malta. Meanwhile Thomson had written to Beethoven on August 5 and October 30, and it is necessary to glance at these letters, together with a third written in reply on December 21, in order fully to appreciate the next letter from the composer.

On August 5, then, Thomson wrote acknowledging the receipt of fifty-three Scotch, "Gallic,"

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<sup>1</sup> On two subsequent occasions Beethoven hints at this visit, and twice Thomson asks when he may expect to see him ; but the visit was never paid. The composer told Wegeler that if it had not been for his bad hearing he would have travelled through half the globe.



and Irish airs, with symphonies and accompaniments. He had heard them performed with the warmest admiration, and he anticipated a great success for them. He indicates specifically those which will be most popular, "because they are the simplest and the easiest to play on the piano: at the same time there is not one but is marked with the stamp of genius, learning, and taste." Certain of the accompaniments, however, will fail to please, because the taste of the public is not sufficiently refined to appreciate their excellence. Will Beethoven oblige him by altering them here and there? He is willing to grant extra pay. "Your great predecessor Haydn invited me to point out frankly everything which was likely not to please *the national taste*,<sup>1</sup> and he very readily altered all those to which I took exception." He proceeds to suggest, with becoming deference, reasons why in the case of nine specified airs these alterations are necessary. In one case, he says, "there is not in this country one pianoforte player in a hundred who could make both hands go properly together in the first *ritornello*; I mean, play four notes with one hand and three with the other at the same time." In another case, the accompaniment is too brilliant, and the runs are totally unsuited to a tender and plaintive air. He apologises for his candid criticism. "If I consulted only my own feelings, I should not ask you to alter a single note; but for a work like mine to succeed, it is

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<sup>1</sup> The italics are in every case in the originals.



necessary to make some sacrifices to the taste of those for whom it is intended." He sends eighteen more airs for treatment, and, by way of final assuagement, assures Beethoven that no other composer's work will be admitted to his collection.

On October 30 he acknowledges the receipt of nine more airs, and cannot find words to express his delight with them. "But, my dear sir," he continues, "there are some which are much too difficult for *our* public. There is not one young lady in a hundred who will so much as look at an accompaniment if it is ever so little difficult." He insists that a simplicity which is manifest at once to the eye is of the utmost consequence if the work is to succeed: "otherwise all my care, all my trouble, the money I have spent, the years I have waited for you, will end for me in nothing but loss and disappointment. Don't think that what is easy to you is easy to us also; for in music you are in very truth a giant, and we are but pygmies."

Five weeks after this, Thomson received Beethoven's letter of the previous February, and on December 21 he despatched his reply. His feelings are evidently wounded. He assures Beethoven "on his honour" that Haydn asked but two ducats apiece for the airs he arranged, though, as a matter of grace, Thomson had given him a little extra for the last of them. He positively declines to raise his terms; says that he cannot supply words to the airs, because "most of them are still in the brain of the poet"; and expresses his pleasure in the prospect of seeing and hearing his "great

Apollo." Perhaps Beethoven will instil into the British public "a real taste for what is excellent. The taste of the English is utterly corrupted by the wretched little compositions of inferior artists, and the most contemptible music has, as a rule, the greatest success!"

These letters of Thomson will enable us to understand the abruptness and the hauteur of Beethoven's letter of February 19, 1813. He begins:

Mr. George Thomson at Edinburgh. I have received your three letters of 5th August, 30th October, and 21st December last. I observe with much pleasure that the sixty-two airs I composed for you have at last reached you, and that you are satisfied with them, with the exception of the nine which you mark, and of which you wish me to alter the *ritornelli* and the accompaniments. I regret that I am unable to oblige you. I am not accustomed to tinker my compositions. I have never done so, being convinced of the truth that every partial modification alters the whole character of the composition. I am grieved that you are out of pocket through this, but you cannot lay the blame on me, for it was your business to make me more fully acquainted with the taste of your country and the meagre abilities of your performers.

But the composer is not inexorable. Though he will not patch, he will create anew.

Now, primed with your instructions, I have composed them all over again, and, as I hope, in a way that will fulfil your expectations. Believe me, it was with great repugnance that I prevailed on myself to stretch my invention on the rack, which I should never have agreed to do if I had not reflected that, as you do not mean to

admit any compositions but mine into your collection, my refusal might leave a gap in it, and [render nugatory]<sup>1</sup> in consequence the great trouble and expense you have put yourself to to obtain a complete work.

The rest of this letter consists mainly of explanations of various marks in the MSS., and other details of no general interest. The following passage, however, shows that Beethoven was not wholly subdued to financial considerations, and that he was impatient of ambiguities :

The two last airs in your letter of December 21 pleased me very much, and for that reason I have worked at them *con amore*, especially the second of the two. You wrote it in A flat, but as that key seemed hardly right, and so little fitted to the instruction *amoroso* that on the contrary it would change it to *barbarico*, I have treated it in the proper key. If in future there should be *andantinos* in the airs you may happen to send me, I should be glad if you indicated whether the *andantino* is meant to be slower or quicker than *andante*, for that term, like so many others in music, is of so uncertain a signification that *andantino* often approximates to *allegro*, and is often, on the other hand, played almost like *adagio*.

Thomson was constantly harassed by his uncertainty as to whether his letters and packages reached their destination safely. Many of his letters, indeed, were sent in duplicate by different routes. It appears from a letter dated December 9, 1813, and addressed to a Mr. J. Thomson of Edinburgh, that the aid of smugglers was frequently enlisted for the

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<sup>1</sup> The MS. is defective here.

carriage of packets to and from France, and that the smugglers of Folkestone had on one occasion declined to take charge of a packet of music owing to its size. It is not, then, surprising to find Thomson writing on March 27, 1813, a letter which is in all essentials a duplicate of his letter of December 21 in the previous year, Beethoven's reply to which we have just seen. This reply reached Thomson in September, and was acknowledged in a long letter sometime during the same month. He tells Beethoven that he has repaid to the Messrs. Fries the 90 ducats the composer has drawn from them, but that the music has not made its appearance, and he begs Beethoven to make another copy and send it to him. He goes on :

You will excuse me if I express my surprise at your having rewritten nine of your ritornelles and accompaniments, and at your having made me pay 27 ducats for them, when there were only three that needed rewriting. I never imagined that you would have any objection to making the very slight alterations I desired in the other six airs. There does not exist a man to whom I would more willingly give money than M. Beethoven ; but, in truth, the music and the poetry of this work, and the plates, will cost me more money than I shall ever be likely to derive from it.

This is one more link in the chain of evidence which proves that Thomson no longer expected—if he ever had expected—his labours to result in anything but a *succès d'estime*. He proceeds to state that he encloses the words for six English songs, commis-

sioned so long ago as July 1810. The subjects are as follows :

The battle of Hohenlinden—grand and sublime, beginning : "On Linden when the sun was low."

On May morning—description of the delights, the gaiety, and the beauty of May, beginning : "Now the bright morning star."

The adieux of a lover to his charming mistress—full of pathos, beginning : "Once more, enchanting girl, adieu."

The happy Italian shepherdess, singing the pleasures and the beauties of the valley of her birth, beginning : "Dear is my little native vale."

Song of Norman, a young warrior obliged to tear himself from the arms of his well-beloved Mary at the moment of his nuptials—very pathetic, beginning : "The heath this night must be my bed."

The sixth song expresses the despair of a lover.

These titles and descriptions are sufficient index of the kind of ditty which Thomson found so pleasing to the "young female friends" of his generation.

It may as well be said here that music for these six songs was never written. On November 12, 1814, Thomson substitutes two fresh songs, written by William Smyth, for two in his first list, and on January 2 in the next year he withdraws one of these two in favour of another, written expressly "by one of your most zealous admirers" (William Smyth again), "and I know nothing finer in the whole range of English poetry." I have not seen these verses, but Thomson's critical appreciations are so remarkable that there is no great sense of loss, even after reading the French prose trans-



lation which he encloses to whet Beethoven's invention. It was not till February 7, 1815, that Beethoven replied to his proposal, and then far from satisfactorily :

With respect to the six canzonettas which I am to compose, I confess that the honorarium you offer is totally inadequate. Circumstances here are much altered, and taxes have been so much raised—after the English fashion—that my share for 1814 was near £60 ; besides, a good original air, and what you also wish, an overture,<sup>1</sup> are perhaps the most difficult undertakings in musical composition. I therefore beg to state that my fee for six songs or airs must be £35, or 70 imperial ducats. . . . You may depend that I shall do you justice. No artist of talent and merit will consider my demands extravagant.

On March 20, Thomson burst out in notes of exclamation over this extortionate demand. "Two years ago," he cries, "you asked for 25 ducats for six original airs ; now you demand nearly three times that sum !" Declaring that he cannot afford so much, he continues :

For the six airs, in regard to the poetry for which I have given myself an infinity of trouble, I will give you 35 ducats ; and that, solely to gratify my own taste, for it is extremely uncertain whether the sale of these airs when printed will ever recoup my outlay, what with the expenses of engraving, printing, paper, &c. If you will not accept 35 ducats, I must ask you to have the goodness to put all the verses I have sent you on the fire.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For this, see *infra*, page 332.

<sup>2</sup> In this same letter occurs almost the only "human" touch to be found in all Thomson's letters to the composer. Beethoven had apparently addressed his last letter to "George Thomson, *music-seller*." "Don't call me '*music-seller*,'" retorts Thomson ; "I am an *amateur* ; I sell nothing but my national airs, and those *wholesale*."



The correspondence discloses no answer from Beethoven, and the only other reference to these unlucky "six airs" occurs in Thomson's last letter to the composer, which we shall light upon by and by. The rest of the letter of September 1813 is worth quoting :

I am extremely desirous of seeing some more of your charming quatuors and sonatas. I lately spent some days in the country with a little select coterie of amateur friends, where among other things we performed your first Rasoumoffsky quatuor, and the quintuor in C. We repeated them every day with increased pleasure, and every day we drank with enthusiasm to the health of the composer. What an immortal theme, that adagio ! [He quotes two bars.] To hear it would solace me even when dying ! But, alas ! my friend, we have not in Scotland a dozen persons (professionals included) who could take a part in these quatuors, and not one who could play *correctly* the violino primo of any of the three ! What would my happiness have been if Providence had fixed me in Vienna, where I might have heard your quatuors, sonatas, and symphonies well played every day of the week ! It is much to be wished that you would compose some music in that grand and original style which belongs to you alone, but easier to perform, so that it would be more within the capacity of amateurs. Such works would be a real treasure to musicians. Simple and expressive music will always have a great charm for all listeners, and difficult music will probably be neglected.

On April 23, 1814, Thomson acknowledges the receipt of thirty Irish airs, which had been despatched by way of Paris more than a year before. He tells Beethoven that the first volume of Irish airs has just been printed, and that a copy is on its

way to Vienna. Then he returns to the subject of publication on the Continent, which Beethoven believed he had settled once for all four years before. Thomson is even insistent in his mode of expression :

I trust to your honour not to permit any of my airs save those contained in this volume to appear on the Continent. As soon as I publish another volume, which will be next year, I will send it you ; but until you receive the volume printed by me, you will keep the manuscript in your hands as a *sacred trust*, and you will not give it to anybody under any pretext whatever ; for, if you put it in the power of any other person to print the work before myself, you will deprive me of the property which I have bought of you, and which has cost me so dear.

There appears to have been no ground for mistrusting the composer, and remembering his explicit declaration of July 20, 1811, it is somewhat remarkable that Thomson should still have been harping on that string. He concludes this letter as follows :

Have you published any sonatas or quatuors during the past year ? Do you intend to arrange the *Mount of Olives* for voices and pianoforte, with English words ? It is with the greatest pleasure that I congratulate you on the re-establishment of the peace of Europe. I send a sonnet addressed to you by an amateur of this city.

It would have been interesting to know a little more about this sonnet, which Beethoven acknowledges on September 15 in the following terms : "A thousand thanks to the author of the sonnet, who has honoured me in such a beautiful manner, and has written so flatteringly of my merits."

On October 15 Thomson offers the composer further commissions :

In the list of prices which you sent me, I notice that you ask 12 ducats for an overture. I should like to have one, for the pianoforte, rather in the character of our national music, and as gay and *scherzando* as you please ; and if you approve, but not otherwise, I should be pleased by your introducing the enclosed Scotch air, or any other Scotch air which you may like better, somewhere in the overture. And if you enriched the overture by adding accompaniments for violin, flute, viola, and 'cello—*ad libitum*, or rather *obligati*—I should be very pleased to pay you 18 ducats instead of 12. . . . As to the length of the overture, I have only to say that I hope it will not be shorter than the overtures of Mozart, Don Giovanni or Zäuberflöte.

When you send me the overture, tell me if you will compose six or a dozen *little hymns*, or spiritual songs, for voices, in a simple and natural style, for four ducats each : in which case I will send you the verses for you to set the music to. But unless you assure me that you will compose these pieces, I will not trouble myself, nor you, by sending the verses. The piece of Michael Haydn<sup>1</sup> enclosed will give you an idea of the sort of thing I want. . . .

I am very pleased to know that you have been so much occupied : pity you did not tell me on what works. I have just received the London edition of your *Mount of Olives*, a work truly sublime.

It will be convenient to trace here the future fortunes of these last proposals. Of the "little hymns, or spiritual songs," no more is heard. There is not a word to show how Beethoven re-

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<sup>1</sup> This was, as Thomson notes, a piece entitled "While conscious sinners," from Latrobe's first volume.

ceived the notion, whether he seriously considered it, or why Thomson was so wanting in his usual pertinacity as never again to refer to the subject. It is otherwise in regard to the overture. Beethoven asked for this "£25, or 50 imperial ducats." Thomson replies (with lifted hands, we may conjecture), "You once asked 12 ducats for an overture: and you now want four times that sum! Unhappily I am in no position to give such an honorarium. I abandon the overture!"

To go back a few months, on October 1814, Beethoven, for the first and last time in his correspondence with Thomson, offers a proposal on his own initiative. He writes:

To attest our long-standing acquaintance, I offer you one of my works, on the Triumph of Wellington at the Battle of Vittoria, divided into two parts, first, the Battle, second, Symphony of Triumph. The work, composed for full orchestra, was received with general applause in Vienna, and the common request is that it may be performed on the occasion of the visit of the allied sovereigns. The score is arranged for the pianoforte by myself. . . . The composition, which is dedicated to the Prince Regent of England, will not fail to make a fortune.

Now see how Thomson received the offer: he seems to relish the change of parts; he will not throw away the opportunity of a tit-for-tat. On November 12 he writes:

I have received your letter of October last, in which you tell me you have composed a work on the Triumph of Wellington, and ask me how much I will give you for that work. [Beethoven did not explicitly do so: this is a skittle set up to be knocked down.] You say nothing of

voices, whence I conclude that the work is written entirely for instruments. You say nothing of its length, and I am obliged to make a random guess at it. Allow me to say that you ought to have explained yourself more clearly; and you certainly ought to have fixed your own price, as the vendor should do in all cases.

You are not aware, perhaps, that the score would not be of the least use to me. In Great Britain we have so few persons who play the violin well, that the sale of a symphony for full orchestra would not meet the expense of engraving it. This is so true, that I assure you I should not publish a symphony for full orchestra even though you had made me a *present* of the score. The only form in which I could publish the *Battle, &c.*, would be as a grand sonata for the pianoforte, with accompaniments for violin, &c. It is for you, then, to say how much you will ask for this work as a sonata, or concerto, for the pianoforte. But an important consideration is, that if the score came into the possession of some music-seller, he might arrange it and publish it for the piano for his own advantage. This is a great difficulty, unless the score were handed to the purchaser of the sonata.

Beethoven said never a word more about the *Triumph of Wellington*; <sup>1</sup> is it surprising that he did not make Thomson another offer?

We have seen that from the first Thomson had stipulated for *easy* ritornellos and accompaniments, and that Beethoven had frankly confessed how the condition fettered him. As time went by, the editor found more and more occasion to complain that the condition was not being fulfilled. On November 12, 1814, he writes:

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<sup>1</sup> The work was performed in London with great success.



I return one of the three airs you have forwarded, in the hope that you will have the goodness to rewrite it in a more simple and cantabile style, because our ladies here would refuse to touch so chromatic an accompaniment. In truth, they would not be able to sing the air and at the same time play such a part for the left hand.

On January 1, 1816, in acknowledging the receipt of more work, he expresses himself better pleased; but next year he complains that some of Beethoven's accompaniments are "too elaborate, too fantastic"; in December he says, "I have got your magnificent trio in B minor: I have never seen anything so charming and so wonderful; but it is terribly difficult." On June 22, 1818, he writes:

Alas! my good sir, in this country every one finds your works much too difficult; and only a very few masters of the first rank can play them. My songs with your ritornelles and accompaniments do not sell! I lately wrote to my correspondent, one of the chief music-sellers in London, to tell him how much that fact has surprised and disappointed me, and here is his reply: "Beethoven, though a great and sublime artist, *is not understood*, and his arrangement of your songs is *much too difficult* for the public. After all your advertisements in the papers, not one of the volumes with his accompaniments has found a purchaser." So you see that my zeal for your composition has brought me nothing but loss. But, despite a blind public, I will say that several of your last ritornelles and accompaniments strike me as quite easy and thoroughly charming; and I believe that the time is coming when the English will be able to understand and to feel the great beauties of your works. . . . But tell me, my dear sir, is it not



possible for you to display the enchantments of your art in a simpler form? Could not your genius condescend to the composing of music equally superb, but less difficult of execution, so that amateurs could share in so delicious a feast? Is it not true that in all the arts the highest beauty is in general found united with the most perfect simplicity? And is it not such works that obtain the most permanent and universal admiration?

It must be confessed that Thomson plays the philosopher very prettily, but nearly a twelvemonth was to elapse before Beethoven's bottled-up impatience found a vent. In the meantime the indefatigable collector had engaged him in a new project, which by-and-by he sincerely repented having meddled with. On January 1, 1816, he wrote to Beethoven asking for some specimens of the national airs of certain foreign countries which he names—Germany, Poland, Russia, the Tyrol, Venice, and Spain. He offered four ducats for each such air to which the composer would supply the inevitable “*ritornelles* and accompaniments.” Beethoven seems to have found this commission to his liking, for on July 8 we find Thomson acknowledging the receipt of nineteen foreign national airs, with which he professes himself much pleased. But a note of weariness is creeping into his letters; he despairs of a foolish and perverse generation. He says:

I heartily wish that I could induce our public to feel their great beauty, but alas! that can only be a work of time. If you were in England for one or two seasons, employed in giving public performances of your superb pieces, people would no doubt soon lose their taste for

the poor, trashy, contemptible music to which at present they are devoted, and would come to love what is truly original and fine.

His next letter tells of still deeper dejection and chagrin. On October 20 he writes :

It is with much disappointment that I am compelled to tell you that, after having put myself to endless trouble in the endeavour to get English verses written for the 19 airs of different nations which you have sent me, I have had to abandon my design in regard to these songs, because the measure and the singular style of them suits neither the *form* nor the *genius* of English poetry. The efforts of our poets to fit English verses to them have been all in vain.

What else could have been expected? Beethoven had more than once told Thomson that he could not supply truly appropriate accompaniments unless he were furnished with the words as well as the melodies, and Thomson's correspondence with verse-writers ought by this time to have taught him that it is at least as difficult—his common sense might have taught him it is more difficult—to invent words to fit music. He proceeds :

The question now is, what am I to do with these airs and your beautiful accompaniments? As I find it impossible to make songs of them, it has struck me that you could arrange them as pot-pourri overtures [*ouvertures mêlés*] for the pianoforte, and that I might publish them in that form with success. I should be glad then if you would be good enough to arrange the 19 airs in six overtures, in whatever manner seems to you best,

interweaving them with ideas and passages of your own according to the suggestions of your inimitable genius. In fact, the more of yourself you put into these overtures, the more charmed with them I shall be. In the list of prices you sent me last winter you ask 12 ducats for a new and original overture. Now I hope that you will not ask more than half that price for arranging these national airs as overtures. Even at that price, they will be very expensive, for I have already paid you 76 ducats for the 19 airs. I trust then that you will consider 36 ducats a sufficiently liberal honorarium for arranging them. . . . Allow me to suggest that each overture should begin with an Introduction and end with a Finale from your pen. The valse is very popular in our country, and you will perhaps be able to write some of the finales in that style. . . . When you consider how embarrassed I am in regard to these 19 airs, and the loss I suffer on their account, I am sure that you will very readily take a little trouble to render them serviceable to me.

The impression left on the reader by this letter is not very agreeable. Beethoven had simply fulfilled his commission, and ought not to have been saddled with any part of the consequences of his employer's rashness. The light way in which Thomson speaks of stringing together six airs into an overture, of adding original "ideas and passages," and of composing introductions and finales, "putting himself into it," would be amusing were he dealing with any other than a supreme artist. And it is impossible to acquit him of some disingenuousness, for a month later, before he had received Beethoven's reply, he writes to William Smyth asking him to fit verses to twelve of these

very airs, which, he says, will make interesting songs. On June 2, 1817, he asks Smyth how he is getting on with the work, and six months later speaks of his determination to publish the airs as songs.

On December 20, 1816, he writes again to Beethoven, having meanwhile received no answer from him. He tells the composer that in the letter of October 20 he had, among other things, asked him "to write an overture *à la Scezzese* in a lively, playful, and *scherzo* style." Now, it will have been seen that the October letter, as quoted above, contains no such request. The only explanation of the discrepancy I can suggest is as follows : The last words of the October letter, *pour me les rendre utiles*, finish a very full page of Thomson's letter-book. Three-fourths of the other side of the leaf is blank, the remaining fourth being occupied by the beginning of a letter to Sir Alexander Boswell. Now in every other case Thomson's signature is copied as part of the letter. From the absence of the signature here, the abrupt termination of the letter at the foot of a page, and the blank left on the succeeding page, it seems probable that by some accident the copying of the letter was interrupted<sup>1</sup> and the intention of completing it never carried out. The purport of the missing portion may easily be gathered from what follows in the December letter :

I find that instead of placing this overture at the beginning of the little opera entitled *The Jolly Beggars*, it

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<sup>1</sup> It is hardly necessary to say that all the letters are copied by hand.

will be more suitable generally, and more advantageous to me, to put it at the beginning of a volume of Scotch airs to which you and Haydn have written accompaniments, forming a variety of tender, impassioned, gay, and jovial airs.

It is clear from this that Thomson had seriously thought of prefixing a Beethoven overture to a setting of *The Jolly Beggars*. Is it altogether beyond the bounds of possibility that, dissatisfied as he was with Graham's music, he may for one mad moment have thought of entrusting to Beethoven the composition of the whole cantata?

Thomson writes again, on January 24, 1817, pressing for a reply to his last two letters. When the reply came I do not know, for, unluckily, Beethoven's letter is wanting; but in it he had evidently asked 124 ducats for the seven overtures desired by Thomson—the six “pot-pourris,” and the *Jolly Beggars* overture just alluded to. On June 25 Thomson replies:

I must tell you frankly that it is utterly impossible for me to pay you such a price, and that I really don't know how to make you a proposal, you are so *variable* in the prices of your work: for in 1815 you sent me a list of your prices, in which you state that the price for an overture is 12 ducats, neither more nor less. It is not our fashion here to join national airs to prose [Beethoven had apparently suggested that as he could not make verses fit, prose might answer the purpose!]; and, seeing no other way of making profitable use of the foreign airs you sent me, I had indulged the hope that you would be glad to render them of use to me as pianoforte overtures for the sum proposed. But, since you will not



accept this proposal, I venture to make another, which you may find more to your liking. It is as follows. You will select twelve airs of different nations—those that appear to you the best adapted for *variations*; and if you compose variations (not more than eight) to each air, for the pianoforte, in a pleasing style and not too difficult, I will pay you 72 ducats. It will be a very simple matter to write variations on twelve themes already composed.

If you are inclined to write music to English words, there is an ode on the power of music over the passions, ninety-four lines long, a poem quite sublime, which I shall be glad to send you, with a literal translation in German. It is really worthy of your great and brilliant genius, and, if you set it for voices and full orchestra, I am convinced that it will be as much admired as *The Creation*.

I need not tell you with what enthusiasm I admire your works. I am enraptured with them, and there is nothing in the world I desire so much as to make a pilgrimage to Vienna to see you, and to hear your Masses, Sonatas, Symphonies, and Quatuors performed by the great musicians of your country; for, alas! the greater part are too difficult for Edinburgh. In Vienna I should fancy myself in heaven! What a pity that from Edinburgh to Vienna is so long a road!

Heaven is a long way off, even from Edinburgh! Beethoven's reply to this letter was written on February 21, 1818. He addresses Thomson as "my dear friend," and begins with a reference to some criticism of his accompaniments which Thomson has made:

Some songs are not successful without a good deal of trouble [on the composer's part], though one would not think so when playing or reading them. In songs



like No. 2, for instance [in the batch he is sending], the proper harmonies are quickly found ; but to succeed in preserving the simplicity, the character, the genius of the song is not always so easy. As you will readily believe, an infinite number of harmonies is possible, but only one suits the genius and the character of the melody ; and you may always give a dozen ducats more, and yet not really pay for the work. If you honour me with other songs, I shall be better pleased if you send me a large number, which it would be better worth my while to devote myself to. . . .

It was impossible to reply to your letter of June 25. I was too busy, and still on the sick list, and it is difficult to serve you in this matter. Be assured that I always deal with you as with a friend, but I am powerless against circumstances. I make you another proposal : I am ready to compose for you twelve overtures for a fee of 140 ducats ; I am ready to compose for you twelve themes with variations for 100 ducats ; but if you wish me to compose both the overtures and the themes with variations, I can accept 224 ducats for the whole. With such little things one does not stand to gain anything, unless there is a sufficient number to bring in a respectable sum. You see I speak quite frankly, as one friend to another. I assure you that I very often put my reputation in my pocket solely that I may serve you on the easiest possible terms.

You mentioned an ode with English words on the power of music over the passions, with a literal translation in German. I will attempt it with the greatest pleasure, and will try to set it to music at an early date. Be good enough to send me the poem. . . . I still have by me some English poems, some of which are very fine, and I should love to set them to music.

After a suggestion that Thomson should, in arranging his volumes, pay more attention to the

avoidance of monotony by a judicious mixture of grave and gay, he subscribes himself, "with esteem and true friendship, your Beethoven."

Thomson, in his reply of June 22, makes mention of another letter from Beethoven, dated March 2, which unhappily is missing. He says that if he were rich, or saw any real chance of getting his money back, he would willingly grant the composer his own terms; then he goes on to say that the songs do not sell. He abandons the overtures, but agrees to pay 100 ducats for twelve themes with variations. He is glad that Beethoven will attempt the English ode, and is sure that if the composer would bring it to England himself, and have it performed under his own direction, it would not only procure him a great deal of money, but enhance his reputation. Then he delivers his exhortation to easiness, already quoted.

When the themes with variations came to hand, Thomson as usual has to complain that some of them are much too difficult. "Our Scotch ladies can't surely be so strong as yours," he writes on January 8, 1819. In April, while sending more airs to be accompanied, he writes :

I am sorry to tell you that one of the best pianists here, a friend of mine, has toiled hard to play the Tyrolese themes, and has abandoned them in despair, having found them too elaborate, chromatic, and terribly difficult. . . . But I suppose it is useless to ask you to make the variations more simple. I fear that to take that trouble would not suit you, and so it will be useless for me to publish the work ; a great pity !

The great man had endured this sort of thing very patiently, and it would not have been inconsistent with his character if he had at last exploded in wrath. On May 25, 1819, however, he writes as follows:

2,37  
MY DEAR FRIEND,—You are always writing “easy,” “very easy”; I do my best to satisfy you, but—but—the fee will have to be more “difficult,” or I might say ponderous!!!!!!!!<sup>1</sup> . . . The fee for a theme with variations which I fixed in my last letter to you—not less than 10 ducats—is, I solemnly assure you, only so low out of mere favour to you; for I have no need of troubling myself with such trifling things; still, there is always some loss of time with such trifles, and honour does not allow me to tell any one what I make out of them. I wish you may always have a real taste for true music; if you cry “easy,” I shall retort with “difficult” for your “easy”!!!—Your friend,

BEETHOVEN.

This is the last letter from Beethoven we have. In it the true man speaks out as perhaps never before in this correspondence. There is the dignity of the complete artist disguising itself in a humorous condescension, for friendship's sake, to the limitations of a smaller man. We cannot tell precisely what led to the cessation of the correspondence. In November 1819 Thomson passes more strictures on the variations. In June 1820 he writes that no one asks for the variations he has published,

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<sup>1</sup> The French must be quoted here; translation is impossible; “Vous écrivez toujours “facile” “très facile”; Je m'accommode [*sic*] tout mon possible, mais—mais—mais—l'honoraire pourroit pourtant être plus difficile, ou plutôt pesante!!!!!!!!”

and all his outlay (he puts the total at £94) is quite thrown away! He offers to make them over to any Vienna music-seller Beethoven pleases, in exchange for settings of those luckless six English songs he had sent so many years ago. After that, not a word on either side; and seven years later, Beethoven passed into the great silence.

It need only be remarked in closing that all Beethoven's Scotch and Irish songs are given in Breitkopf & Härtel's complete edition of his works (Series xxiv., Nos. 257-260). In the winter of 1860-61 there appeared in Germany a selection of the Scotch songs from Beethoven's MSS., edited by Franz Espagne. "The songs printed in Thomson's collection," says the editor in his preface, "are, both as to text and music, not only incorrectly printed, but wilfully altered and abridged." These groundless charges, as Mr. Thayer, the biographer of Beethoven, remarks, "were made honestly, but with a most plentiful lack of knowledge." They need not be discussed here. It is sufficient to say that they were completely refuted in the Vienna *Deutsche Musikzeitung* of November 23 and December 28, 1861. The national themes with variations were purchased from Thomson for £50 in 1830, by Messrs. Paine & Hopkins, of London, after having been offered to several other music-sellers.

## WEBER

Although he tells him that he "had the pleasure of hearing many pleasing particulars of you from Mr. Kalkbrenner when lately in Edinburgh," it is quite evident from his first letter to the composer that other causes led Thomson to employ Weber on behalf of his collections. Writing on the 18th of January 1825, he says :

Although I have not the honour of being known to you, I flatter myself you will pardon me for the liberty I take in thus addressing you. It is but lately that we have had an opportunity in Edinburgh of becoming acquainted with your genius. The manager of our theatre has at last given us *Der Freischütz*,<sup>1</sup> a work which ought to place the name of Weber upon everlasting and glorious record. No words of mine can express the delight which it has afforded to the lovers of music here. You have soared into the highest and wildest regions of imagination with the happiest success, and I feel for you the utmost admiration, respect, and gratitude.

From this fine specimen of what Swift calls "the food of fools," Thomson goes on to tell Weber that, admiring his genius no less than that of "your illustrious countrymen, Haydn and others," whom he has already employed, he must "entreat that you will have the goodness to contribute your talents

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<sup>1</sup> Weber's romantic opera was produced on December 29, 1824, under the direction of Mr. Hawes "of the King's Chapel." It had a run of some twenty-one nights.



also to enrich my work." Ten melodies are enclosed for treatment, four ducats being offered for each—"the highest sum which Haydn and other distinguished German composers demanded and received." Thomson's detractors must here remark it as strange that he did not try Weber with less than the "highest sum." But that by the way. "If," he adds, "you favour me with a few lines when you send the music, will you be so good as to tell me what you would demand for three entirely new overtures for the pianoforte, with accompaniments for the violin, flute, viola, and violoncello?"

No reply to this letter is extant, although among Thomson's papers there is an acknowledgment of the forty ducats paid to Weber for the ten airs through the Baroness Eude. The following, dated from Dresden, September 18, 1825, is the only letter of the composer in my hands. A second letter from Thomson is evidently missing. Weber writes (in English of his own invention):

I have the honour to send you herewith the two ritornelles [a retouching, no doubt] agreeably I hope to your wishes. If I have not been capable to satisfy you entirely, it depends upon my unfitness to compose in conformity with commands. I pray to let me know in what time the Scottish airs will appear, and to send me one copy of them. I thank you hearty for your good wishes respecting my health, which I find much better after the use of the baths of Ems.

Thomson answers this letter on the 6th of December following, by sending four more airs, with a draft for sixteen ducats. Weber, alas! never earned



the money. The circumstances are explained by the following letter of June 9, 1826, written by an Edinburgh firm to the Frankfort banking-house through which the composer was to be paid. The letter was presumably drafted by Thomson :

SIRS,—Mr. Thomson, of this city, having in December last written to Mr. Carl Maria von Weber to request him to compose a little music for him, as he had done formerly, we, according to Mr. Thomson's wish, gave him an order upon you to pay to Mr. von Weber sixteen ducats upon his receipt. The composer, who at that time was busy in preparing for his journey to England, did not find leisure to do what Mr. Thomson wanted, and since his arrival in London was so constantly occupied in bringing out his opera of *Oberon* and at concerts as to have been unable to think of the music for Mr. Thomson. Unfortunately for the musical world, that celebrated composer is no more ; he died on Sunday last, deeply regretted by every admirer of genius. As it may happen that his friends in going over his papers may find our order upon you above mentioned, and in ignorance of the circumstances before stated may possibly apply to you for payment of the money, we write this to *prevent* your paying it, if it should be demanded.

Weber's work for Thomson was thus limited to the ten airs sent to him in January 1825. These were subsequently issued with German words by Probst of Leipzig under the title of *Zehn Schottische National Gesänge*. Sir Julius Benedict, in his biography of Weber, has rather an interesting note on the little collection, though he, too, must have his slip about "Mr. George Thompson, an eminent publisher." Thomson's idea (the idea of employing

continental musicians), says Benedict, was not a happy one. Had he "told the great composers that he wished to have the harmonies (sometimes incorrect and awkward) reviewed and altered, without changing the simplicity and originality of their treatment, the result would have been quite different. But leaving them full scope to add and modify as they liked, the consequence was, that the very essence of the originals was often changed, and that it is difficult to recognise them. There are harmonic turns—accompaniments for the instruments added—which, though skilfully managed—as how could they be otherwise?—alter entirely what ought to have been preserved. They have never become, and never will become, popular." This is as candid as it is true. That Weber's biographer should relieve one of the necessity of saying it is a great matter.

### HUMMEL

Johann Nepomuk Hummel was one of a trio of pianoforte virtuosi of his period, the two others being Moscheles and Kalkbrenner. Berlioz calls him "a man of great talent, a severe pianist." He had been a pupil of Mozart, and was for some time Beethoven's rival in love matters, having married a sister of the singer Roeckel, to whom Beethoven also was much attached. Latterly he renounced playing in public and devoted himself almost entirely to composition and teaching.

Thomson opened his correspondence with him

in 1826. He then writes, on the 3rd of April, sending him five airs to be furnished with symphonies and accompaniments, and telling him, in the usual courtly fashion, that his desire to have his collection "enriched by some specimens of your talents" arises from "the enjoyment which I have lately had in your graceful and most beautiful compositions and the great respect I have for your genius." Adverting to the ever-pressing question of terms, he says: "The highest sum which Haydn and Beethoven demanded and received was four ducats for each melody; and I flatter myself you will not be offended if I offer the same to you." A draft for twenty ducats accordingly accompanies the commission. The following further quotation from this letter is of some little interest:

The other night I heard the charming boy Aspull<sup>1</sup> play your most admirable septetto in D minor with the accompaniments, with which we were quite electrified. It is a glorious composition. We take great pleasure in playing your trios in my own family; they are delightful. One is so difficult, however, as to be rather beyond our powers. I remember you well in Edinburgh, when you was about Aspull's age, along with my good friend Mr. Salomon, and of spending many pleasant hours in your company. I wish with all my heart you would return once more. This is now an elegant city, with many lovers of music who would be happy to see and hear you play your delicious compositions.

Hummel started work on his commission at once, and was ready to send all the five airs to Thomson

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<sup>1</sup> George Aspull, born in 1814, at a very early age manifested an extraordinary capacity as a pianist.

on the 1st of June (1826). He writes in English, excusing himself for its being "bad and incorrect" by the fact that "it is about 35 years ago since I was in Scotland and England." It may be well to have a specimen of this Weimar English—and, I may add, of Weimar orthography :

You will certainly remark that I have served myself of the art only as an ornament of nature ; that the application of the instruments is *ad locum*, without covering the principal partie, *the voice* ; and so I hope it will answer to your purpose. I have only to remark you in this occasion that the price of four ducats is very low for the present circumstances, the compositions of distinguished authors being payd much higher now than before in our country ; and so much more as you desired the airs to be accompanied also by a flute, which did not Mr. Haydn. . . . For those reasons I hope you will do me justice and raise the honorar something more, when you'll favour me in future with more airs.

The "honorar" was certainly liberal enough—for Hummel. However, in 1829 Thomson sent him twelve airs, and so far met his wish as to pay him sixty ducats for the work—that is to say, about ten shillings more than he had paid for the first lot. This was really generous remuneration, considering Hummel's standing as a composer, and what Haydn and Beethoven had been content to take ; and it is a point in Thomson's favour that he made no debate about it. In forwarding the packet on October 15 (1829) Hummel writes, still in Weimar English :

I notice to you that in the month of March next year I schall come to England and if convenable offers are

made to me by the musical amateurs of Edinburgh, I shall be very glad to see again Scotland, which pleased me very much when I was there at the age of eleven years.

Of course Thomson "will be happy to see" the latest acquisition to his staff, but "the amateurs here are far from being so numerous or so enthusiastic as in your wonderful country," and "they *never* make proposals to any professor." These were not the palmy days of the concert agent and the "star" travelling pianist, otherwise there would assuredly have been "proposals."

Some of Hummel's accompaniments unfortunately proved like some of the accompaniments of his predecessors—they were too difficult. "Our people," says Thomson, "will not look at a pianoforte accompaniment if it is learned or *recherché*, or if it is not perfectly easy for the fingers, and therefore it would not be advisable for me to offer any such to the public." If Hummel will not condescend to consider "the fingers of the pianoforte accompanist," then Thomson "must be contented with the more simple accompaniments of other masters." In the meantime he returns such of the airs (four) as he thinks are too difficult, asking Hummel to simplify them, and enclosing £2 for the extra trouble thus given. Hummel did his best to meet the views of his employer, but Thomson would have "nothing that requires too much attention to the fingering," and one of the "simplified" accompaniments had actually to go back a second time, with an extra pound-note for the expected retouching.



Hummel continued to work for Thomson for some time after this, but there is no further correspondence on either side worth noting.

### SIR HENRY R. BISHOP

Up to the year 1818 the correspondence with Bishop had been all about the music for *The Jolly Beggars*. That section of it being dealt with in a separate part of this volume, we may look here at the few letters which followed. On the 15th of August 1818, Bishop writes to Thomson, introducing to his attention "a very particular friend of mine, Mr. John Loder of Bath."<sup>1</sup> Mr. Loder's talents as a performer on the violin, he continues, "are no doubt already known to you; and the fame he has gained by his performances at the Philharmonic Concerts has perhaps also reached you. You will find him, too, in every other respect worthy of whatever kindness you may do me the favour to show him during his stay in Edinburgh." The following further extract from this letter is of some interest:

Beethoven has been invited by the Philharmonic Society to visit this country, but the terms offered were not deemed by him sufficient. I know not what they were, for I was not present when the proposition was made. I hope, however, to carry the point. I fully intend at our next meeting to propose of [*sic*] engaging him to come on such terms as will be handsome and satisfactory to him.

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<sup>1</sup> This was the author of the well-known *Violin School*.



The offer made to Beethoven was a sum of three hundred guineas in consideration of his coming to London and superintending the production of two symphonies to be composed by him for the Philharmonic Society. He demanded four hundred guineas, and accordingly the arrangement was not carried into effect. No mention is made of the matter having been reconsidered in 1818 in George Hogarth's *History of the Philharmonic Society*; and not having had access to the minutes, I am unable to say whether Bishop made the proposal he here promises to make.

Thomson first asked Bishop to undertake the arrangement of some songs for him in May 1841. The arrangements of three Scottish airs are completed within a month and six guineas paid for the work. In July he makes an arrangement of "God save the Queen," keeping it "as simple as possible," which indeed "is the only mode of arranging our National Anthem without making it too elaborate." Bishop's arrangement, with Moir's ("Delta's") verses, appeared as a finale to the Scottish collection, Thomson explaining that though his country can lay no claim to the air, "yet its beauty, with the pure harmony of Bishop and the eloquence of the Scotch verses" will, he hopes, render it acceptable. The "pure harmony" had been originally "the rich harmony," which did not quite please Bishop when he came upon it in the proof. And there was something else to complain of, as the following letter of September 18 (1841) will show:

I could wish that less were said in the title-page of the "God save the Queen" about the "rich harmony of Bishop," as what I have done does not deserve to be rated so highly. The harmonies are perhaps pure, simple, and appropriate to the air, but are by no means "rich." And pray oblige me by omitting the "Esquire." For though courtesy may honour me with that title on the back of a letter, I do not think it should be printed to any work of mine. It has never yet pleased a monarch of our kingdom to make a poor musician either a Knight or Esquire; although painters, sculptors, architects, &c. &c. &c. have had abundance of those honourable distinctions. And I am not anxious, indeed am averse, to see my name "in print" with any other title beyond what may really belong to me. I hope, at the same time, that the alteration may not cause you any material inconvenience.

One year later—as it might have been with Johnson and the definition of "pension"—Bishop would probably have written differently about "those honourable distinctions," for he was then Sir Henry. As it was, Thomson had to delete the "Esquire," and let the composer stand as plain H. R. Bishop.

## THE MUSIC OF "THE JOLLY BEGGARS"

THE story of Thomson's connection with "The Jolly Beggars" might have been told in dealing with the correspondence about the music for his collections, but I have thought it better to give it a section to itself. Burns, it will be remembered, wrote this "puissant and splendid production," as Matthew Arnold calls it, in Ayrshire during the spring-time of his genius. He laid it aside, with probably no intention of giving it to the world, and was reminded of its existence by Thomson in 1793. Burns then sent a copy of the cantata to Thomson, who ever afterwards regarded it as among the other poetic favours which the poet had specially bestowed upon him.

The piece was first printed in an imperfect state towards the end of last century by Stewart & Meikle of Glasgow, and in 1802 was published in complete form. Thomson had his eye on it from the beginning, but the passages which, as Scott gently put it, "slightly trespassed on decorum," most effectually prevented his doing anything with it as it stood. At last, in November 1816, he announces to Sir Alexander Boswell that he has brought the production within the bounds of decency. He says :

I have frequently formed a wish that Burns' cantata of *The Jolly Beggars* were rendered fit for the public eye,

and regretted that a piece so exquisitely humorous and full of character should to the ladies be as a sealed book. After revolving it long in my mind I resolved to try whether I could not free it of the exceptionable passages without injury to the spirit and the connection of the poem. I flatter myself I have succeeded, and that I shall deserve the thanks of the sex for introducing a composition of such extraordinary genius to their acquaintance. . . . I would be very glad to submit the poem to you in its state of purification, if you would not reckon it troublesome to look it over and give me your opinion of it as it now stands, having the utmost confidence in your excellent judgment.

There is nothing extant to show what Boswell thought of the "purification"; all things considered, it is hardly likely that he would approve of Thomson's tampering with the piece. But whether he approved or not would have mattered little to Thomson at this stage, for he had already got the cantata "set to masterly music" by George Farquhar Graham.<sup>1</sup> So, at any rate, he informed Boswell. But the music turned out to be too masterly. The following letter of 1814, from his brother David, shows that Thomson had practically decided to give up Graham while his setting of the cantata was yet unfinished:

I always thought Graham had a fine taste for the rich and varied harmony of the German school of *instrumental*

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<sup>1</sup> Thomson had asked Graham to start on the music two years before this—in August 1814. "It strikes both Mr. Hogarth and me that if you would invoke the muse to her highest efforts in lively and spirited composition you could set the cantata very happily. Mr. Hogarth indeed flatters me with the hope that you will think it a pleasure to do it and that you will set about it *con amore*."

music, but I confess I never thought he had a good idea of a *vocal* style, or of characteristic melody. He allows his desire of displaying learning to run away with that uninterrupted flow which melody should always have, and which the accompaniments should only support and enrich. The difficult roulades you speak of appear to me as inconsistent with the style of *Jolly Beggars*, as the airs and graces of Correggio, and the deep blue skies and flying draperies of Titian would be in one of Ostade's or Teniers' humorous scenes. I should think the best way of treating Burns' poem would be to have the airs as simple and characteristic as possible; and instead of intricate recitatives, to adopt the semi-aria style sometimes made use of in the grotesque scenes of the buffa Italian opera. Bishop appears to me better in choruses than in songs, and I am almost sure he would ask a much greater sum than you mention. The person who does it should be a Scotchman, and all things considered I should think William Clarke<sup>1</sup> more fit for the task than any one I know; he has a very fine natural taste, and has written several very pretty, simple melodies in a national style; he also knows musical composition well, and is a piano-forte *player*. It is as you say, however, a delicate matter to take it from Graham, but if it is to be done, it would be better now than after he has spent more time on it.

David Thomson showed his good sense in suggesting here that Graham should be at once released from a commission which was so likely to turn out unsatisfactorily. But the suggestion was not adopted; the cantata was completed, and the score placed in Thomson's hands. There is a letter addressed by Thomson in November 1816 to John

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<sup>1</sup> Son of Stephen Clarke, who continued his father's work on Johnson's *Musical Museum*.

Mather, one of the leading musicians of the capital, asking him to examine Graham's music professionally and point out wherein he found it too difficult. This matter of difficulty is the crux of the whole business with Thomson. There is, he tells Mather, "prodigious merit" in the music, and if Graham would "alter and simplify it in some parts" he feels sure it would "become popular and raise his name where it is not yet known." The generality of professors "will not look at very difficult music, but condemn it untried; and it has often vexed me to see Mr. Graham in his various compositions so wholly unmindful of this." What Mather's report was like we do not know, but the final result of the whole matter is before us, in the following letter of January 1817 from Thomson to Graham:

I have heard Mather go over your opera again and again, and although his dexterity of hand enables him to play through the piece and to bring out its brilliant beauties, as Mrs. Stark [see page 47] did, very much to my delight, yet, highly as I admire a great part of it, I now plainly perceive that the performance of it requires more talent than is to be found among the generality of those for whom my volumes are intended. My daughter Anne, though not a great player, is on a footing with at least nine-tenths of the Scottish ladies in ready reading and execution; yet I found, after carefully attending to her repeated performance of the music, that she is so frequently obliged to stop and to bungle it, that I am altogether convinced of its unfitness for making a part of my volume, and therefore with much reluctance, after well considering it, I have resolved to give up the idea of publishing it.



George Hogarth, it appears, was quite opposed to Thomson's opinion of Graham's music, and this evidently caused him some uneasiness, more particularly as Hogarth approved of the manner in which he had pruned the cantata. But though he had failed with Graham, Thomson did not give up the idea of having the cantata set to music. Even to Graham himself he announces that "after purifying this poetical child of my adoption from the gross original sin that he inherited at his birth, I am resolved to produce him in some shape among the rest of my family." And thus it is that we have the setting of *The Jolly Beggars* by Sir Henry R. Bishop.

Thomson applied to Bishop on the 27th of January, two days after he communicated his decision to Graham. The request to set the cantata proceeds, he says, "from my admiration of your talents," and he reminds the composer that he "had once the pleasure of passing an afternoon with you at Mr. Ballantyne's." The great question is the question of terms. "I shall tell you frankly that I can get it done by an eminent composer<sup>1</sup> abroad for less than twenty guineas" (fancy a continental composer setting *The Jolly Beggars*!), "but I have such a high opinion of your genius and taste, and am so anxious to open a correspondence with you, that I would be very happy to give you that sum." To this Bishop replied in a manner that must have

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the correspondence with Beethoven, pp. 339, 340. But Beethoven was certainly not the man to set *The Jolly Beggars* for twenty guineas.

somewhat surprised the condescending editor. He says :

I feel honoured by your distinction of me, and gladly embrace the opportunity your offer affords of being placed by the side of such names as Haydn and Beethoven. But in regard to the *terms* you propose I must confess I have a different feeling. There are seven pieces of music to be composed, for which you propose twenty guineas ! Such a remuneration with me is quite out of the question. But if you think proper, the difference of our opinions in respect to pecuniary reward shall make no bar in the present case to my undertaking the work. I will therefore, for the honour of the company I shall be in, and to commence an acquaintance with you, of which I shall ever feel proud, compose the ode you wish ; and for remuneration (as a pecuniary one is not likely to be agreed on), if you think fit, I shall feel myself perfectly contented by your acknowledgment in a snuff-box, or anything else, of whatever value you may please.

The snuff-box and other things followed in due course. Meantime Thomson could only thank the composer for "the most kind and liberal manner" in which he had agreed to execute the commission. Bishop at once went to work on the music, and Thomson had the score in May. "I assure you," says the composer, "I have bestowed as much attention and labour on the work as I ever did on any work of the kind in the whole course of my musical career. I have done so equally from my respect for you, my admiration of the immortal Burns, and the ambition I feel for a name in Scotland." He then proceeds to discuss at considerable length various details in regard to his setting of the

cantata. The compass of the songs, he thinks, will be found suitable for almost any class of voice ; and he has "preferred writing the part intended for the tenor voice in the bass clef," although he "knows of no substantial reason why the tenor part in vocal music should ever be written but in its proper clef, and it is some degree of disgrace to the musical knowledge of this country" that it is seldom so written. In the introduction he has "made an attempt to paint (musically) the situation of the parties concerned at the time of the commencement of the poem—the season of the year, the time of the evening (which I have expressed by the eight notes which begin the introduction, signifying a bell striking eight o'clock), &c." In the accompaniments to the songs he has "constantly retained the melody, so as to render them fit for the pianoforte, even without the voice." Throughout the entire work "simplicity has been the principal study," and "if any part of the pianoforte accompaniment should seem to you more difficult for execution than that in Haydn's work [accompaniments], I do not think you need fear its being too much so for general performance, as I am convinced that music, as an art, at least, is so considerably advanced during the last seven years there is no part of the accompaniments of this work that is not perfectly within the ability of any tolerable amateur of the present day." In concluding, he hopes that Thomson will do him the justice, before deciding on the music, to "procure a private performance of the work, *with every part*, and in the completest way possible."

The performance was immediately arranged, and on the 29th of May Thomson writes that the cantata was gone through "the other night by our best vocal professors, with the accompaniments, greatly to the delight of all of us."<sup>1</sup> The music is "admirably well adapted to the poetry"; both "the melodies and the choruses appear to me excellent." The three national airs are "very happily set, and the original music is full of that hilarity and joyous spirit for which the poem is so remarkable." The finale is "peculiarly rich and brilliant," and, in short, "the composition altogether is a masterly proof of your talents, and likely to sustain your well-earned reputation." All this being so, "I am now to beg your acceptance of the present herewith sent—a gold snuff-box, with Scottish jasper and agate; a suit of Scottish damask, consisting of a table-cloth and a dozen napkins of different patterns; and two pictures."

Of course, it was not to be expected that the cantata would pass the bar without some criticism and suggestion; and, having thus mollified the composer by gift and compliment, Thomson proceeds to point out wherein he "humbly conceives" the composition to be faulty. We need not follow him in his various suggestions, further, perhaps, than to note his objection to Bishop's vaunted imitations in the introduction. These, he remarks, would quite fail to be caught up by the majority of listeners, and

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<sup>1</sup> *The Jolly Beggars* was produced, for the "first time on any stage," at Edinburgh, March 19, 1823.

therefore they are out of place. Indeed, says he in effect, the composer himself has unconsciously admitted this much by labelling his music with a note of the particular imitations he desires to produce. Thomson obviously had not the artistic insight to enable him to appreciate Bishop's intention — an intention which, nevertheless, was capable of being appreciated emotionally, if not intellectually. On this point, however, it may be well to hear Bishop himself. Writing on the 29th of August, in reply to Thomson's criticisms, he says :

Your arguments for an alteration of the Introduction I can only answer by confessing that I do not quite agree with them ; for it appears to me that *characteristic* music, where it only attempts an imitation of such particulars in nature as are imitated in all overtures and symphonies (without the audience being informed of it) is not less likely to please because the intention of the composer is unknown to the hearers, so that melody is not entirely disregarded in the composition. Witness, for an instance, the finale to one of Haydn's symphonies in which that immortal master gives an imitation of a *dancing bear*, &c., which intention was only known to a few of Haydn's friends, and yet the music always delighted every hearer. You will, of course, do me the justice to believe that I am far from wishing to place the trifle of mine in question by the side of the meanest work of Haydn's for the sake of comparison, but it was the only answer I had to your arguments for an alteration of the Introduction. As to your *wishes* that it should be altered, my answer is a most ready compliance ; and you will therefore find it in a shape more adapted, I think, to the purpose you have mentioned, namely a gay introduction to the subject of the poem.



As for Thomson's presents, they have been "admired by every one who has seen them, with a degree of enthusiasm." At "the dinner we sometime since gave to the celebrated Talma, having the fortune to be placed next to him, I had an opportunity of displaying the beautiful agate snuff-box, which he declared was the handsomest box he had ever beheld—that it was *superbe, magnifique*. Indeed I do not know which to admire most, the box, the pictures, or the damask. I shall always treasure them as a most gratifying memento of *The Jolly Beggars*, and ever remember the truly handsome manner in which they were sent." Thomson says afterwards that *The Jolly Beggars*, "with the expense of engraving," cost him sixty pounds; and all but ten pounds of that sum he sets down as the cost of the gifts to Bishop.

The only other letter dealing with the cantata is one from Thomson to Bishop, when he sends him the proofs. It had been Thomson's original intention to "interpose the recitatives between the songs and choruses," but he now gave up that idea.

In the first place, they [*i.e.* the recitatives] would have an awkward appearance standing nakedly without music; and in the next place I must tell you that at some performances of the music I tried the effect of reading the recitatives, but found it flat and unprofitable. The speaking seemed an interruption to the music, and I am satisfied from these trials that 'tis best to let the music go on uninterruptedly from beginning to end. If we had a very good reciter it might have a good effect to recite the whole cantata before the performance of the music; but it does not seem advisable to read and sing alternately.



From this letter it appears that Thomson had not altogether purified the cantata from its "original sin." The chorus of the fiddler's song had escaped his notice until a friend directed his attention to it; now he recognises that the last couplet of that chorus is "barefaced indecency": the ladies "would not sing it," and therefore he is forced to invent a substitute at the last moment. Here is what Thomson asks his fine ladies to sing:

At kirns and weddings we'se be there,  
And O sae nicely's we will fare,  
We'll bouse about till Daddy Care  
Sing whistle o'er the lave o't.

Not very likely that there would be any objection to this! Thomson, in truth, need not have troubled himself in the matter. The sex who were his particular care would probably have passed the fiddler's chorus as unheeded as he had passed it himself—until the "friend" appeared with the suggestion of evil. Thackeray never suspected that the *Arabian Nights* was an improper book until he read it in a family edition.

*The Jolly Beggars* with Bishop's music was included in the fifth volume of the Scottish collection, published in 1818. On the ground that it was "a complete work by itself, and should not be incorporated with any other," Thomson afterwards (in 1826) removed it from the volume, and made strenuous efforts to sell the copyright. These efforts were unsuccessful, and the cantata was sold at last with the other works.

## BURNS FAMILY LETTERS

THE following letters addressed to Thomson by Mrs. Burns, by two of the poet's sons, and by his brother Gilbert, may, for convenience, be printed together in one chapter, and in their order of date. There is very little to say regarding them by way of preliminary unless it be to remark upon the excellent if somewhat frigid style of Mrs. Burns' communications. Mr. Stevenson has pictured Jean Armour as an ignorant, "empty-headed girl"; but if these letters were written by herself—and there is no reason for supposing that they were not—the poet made no such fatal mistake in choosing her for his wife as Mr. Stevenson would have us believe. Another thing that should be noted about these letters is their uniformly warm and friendly tone. It is evident that whatever Professor Wilson and others might think and say about Thomson's pecuniary relations with Burns, the members of the family who are here represented took a generous and common-sense view of the whole circumstances of the case.

The first letter is from Gilbert Burns, the only brother of the poet who survived him. At this date he occupied the farm of Dinning in Nithsdale; but before the year was out he had removed to East Lothian to manage the farm of Morham West

Mains (now Morham Muir) for Captain Dunlop, son and heir of Mrs. Dunlop of Dunlop. In 1804 Lady Blantyre appointed him factor of her East Lothian estates, and in this capacity he occupied, rent free, the house called Grant's Braes, about a mile west from Haddington, from which several of the following letters are written.

DINNING, 14<sup>th</sup> March 1800.

SIR,—I received your very acceptable present of your songs, which calls for my warmest thanks. If ever I come to Edinburgh I will certainly avail myself of your invitation to call upon a person whose handsome conduct to my brother's family has secured my esteem and confirmed to me the opinion that musical taste and talents have a close connection with the harmony of the moral feelings. I am unwilling indeed to believe that the motives of every one's heart are dark as Erebus, to whom Dame Nature has denied a good ear and musical capacity, as her ladyship has been pleased to endow myself but very scantily in these particulars ; but "happy is the man who possesses it, happy his cot, and happy the sharer of it." To the sharer of yours I beg you will present my most cordial congratulations. My sister-in-law begs me to present her best thanks to you for her copy, and to assure you that however little she may have expressed it, she has a very proper sense of the kind attention you have so frequently shown her.—I am, dear Sir, your most obedient Servant, with the highest esteem,

GILBERT BURNS.

The next letter is from the poet's son, James Glencairn, who, like his brother William Nicol, was in the East India Service. The latter went out as a midshipman, at the age of fifteen. He got a

cadetship in 1811, served for more than thirty years in the 7th Madras Infantry, and retired lieutenant-colonel in 1843. James Glencairn, who got his cadetship in the same year as his brother, rose to be major, and ultimately, in 1855, brevet lieutenant-colonel. Both brothers latterly lived together in retirement at Cheltenham, James dying in 1865, and William in 1872.

DUMFRIES, 15<sup>th</sup> May 1811.

SIR,—I hope you will excuse the liberty I have taken of writing to you just now, but the reason is this. When in Edinburgh you was so kind as to promise me a copy of the songs you gave my brother whenever I came that way. Sir James Shaw has given me a cadetship in the East India Service, with orders to be in London directly, so that it will not be in my power to go by sea for fear of being too late for the ship. If you would give the books to the bearer, who has an opportunity of sending them to Dumfries, from where they may be forwarded to me with the rest of my things, it will much oblige, your obedient Servant,

JAMES BURNS.

The next letter needs some explanation. Gilbert Burns had come to see, mainly from the evidence of Messrs. Gray and Findlater, that Dr. Currie had done some injustice to his brother's memory by the revelation of his "infirmities." The fourteen years' copyright of Currie's edition had expired, and the work was now being reprinted by irresponsible parties. Messrs. Cadell & Davies were anxious to keep their own impressions well in the front, and the idea occurred to them of having a new edition, with notes and emendations by the poet's brother. Wordsworth got to hear of the

negotiations then in progress, and issued a pamphlet in the form of a letter to James Gray, the Academy master of Burns' children at Dumfries. In this letter "the whole question of the biographer's duty to his subject, especially in regard to the extent to which it was proper to go in laying bare faults and failings," was warmly discussed. The evil done by Currie, Wordsworth avowed, should be corrected.

And so Gilbert Burns' edition was prepared. It was published in 1820, and proved a failure. At the instigation of Gray, the editor asked £500 for his services. For this sum Messrs. Cadell & Davies naturally desired and expected a mass of fresh matter, which would give their edition the first place in the market. But there was no fresh matter. The editor "furnished only a very few meagre notes, did not admit any pieces excluded by Currie, and distinguished his edition from the old one chiefly by inserting two letters on the poet's character from Gray and Findlater, and a dissertation from his own pen on the effect of the Scottish national religion upon the Scottish national character." Luckily for themselves the publishers had stipulated that only £250 should be paid if no reprint were called for, and as Gilbert Burns frankly remarked that he "scarce could muster impudence" to ask the £500, he was no doubt quite satisfied with what he received. For further details see Wallace's edition of Chambers's Burns, iv. 296, 525. *The Champion* was the paper for which Keats wrote occasional theatrical criticisms.



GRANT'S BRAES, 25th June 1816.

DEAR SIR,—I received your obliging letter of the 22nd, and had received *The Champion* before, which I conjectured I was indebted to your kindness for. [Here follow some remarks on the price of butter, and the advantage or otherwise of sending it to Edinburgh.] I am very much pleased with Mr. Wordsworth's letter to Mr. Gray, and find no fault with what he says of the Edinburgh reviewer, except that it may be construed to have been produced from his own smarting under the lash so cruelly and wantonly inflicted. I think he is happy in comparing the reviewer with the vanity and cruelty of Robespierre, for certainly there never was in the annals of literature such another instance of assuming confidence and cruel tyranny. I do not doubt that what Mr. Wordsworth proposes in regard to the publication of my brother's works might have a good effect, but it would require so much arrangement and so much writing on my part as I think I cannot go through with. When I come to town I will show you the outline of a plan I sent long ago to the booksellers. I then desired them to get my brother's papers from Liverpool and send them to me, but I have never heard from them since. Among the papers left with Dr. Currie was a narrative of the circumstances of my brother's early life I had written at the request of Mrs. Dunlop. I do not recollect distinctly what it is like; perhaps it might be brushed up a little, and a short addition made to it of the leading circumstances of his life from the time of his first coming to Edinburgh till his death, to serve for the preliminary narrative Mr. W. proposes. I am quite decided that almost none of the letters to my brother in the volume of general correspondence ought to be republished. I am sorry to inform you that Janet's health is no better, and I see that Dr. Welsh considers it a very bad case. He seems to have no doubt that it is a



mycenteric wasting. She has lost flesh so much that I think you would scarcely know her, and though she has more strength than one would expect, being still able to walk out a little, and take a ride behind me twice a day, when I can get her attended to, still she is losing ground in that respect too. This does not fit me any better for any writing exertion, but I must not complain.—I remain, dear Sir, yours sincerely, GILBERT BURNS.

The next two letters are from Mrs. Burns, and require no comment :

DUMFRIES, *2nd October* 1816.

MY DEAR SIR,—I had a letter last week from Mr. George Watson, containing a request from a meeting of gentlemen that I would send my late husband's portrait as a model to Mr. Nasmyth to form a bust by. I am sorry I have not the power to comply with this request at present. The portrait is in London, in the care of Mr. Turnerelli, as a model for the sculpture to be placed in the mausoleum here. I expect it will be returned to me in a short time, when I shall send it according to the directions given. My brother Gilbert recommends me to send it to your care ; this I very readily agree to, as I can place every confidence in your friendship, and will be more satisfied of its safety than when in the hands of strangers. I will hope, when I do send it, that you will return it to me as soon as possible.—With respectful compliments to your family, I am, dear Sir, yours very obediently, JEAN BURNS.

MY DEAR SIR,—I have to acknowledge your very kindly letter of 24th Oct. I thank you for your kind wishes regarding my health, which, I am happy to say, is much better. I hope soon to be quite re-established in it again. Your account of my sons is very highly gratifying to me. I have great satisfaction in every

account I hear of them. I trust they will gain the esteem of their friends by their own good conduct ; it is that alone that can ensure it. I can hardly imagine, however, that any one could have an opportunity of seeing both my sons often, considering the immense distance by which they are separated from each other.

I have not lately heard from William. You will, I am sure, be glad to know that James has had the good fortune to get an appointment in the Commissariat Department, and from the emolument of his new situation proposes to settle an annuity on me. I am glad to hear that the portrait is in so good hands ; I shall take the first safe opportunity I meet with to send for it at the time you mention.

James has very often expressed a wish for a copy of his father's portrait. I thought of ordering one of the engravings you mention, but on consideration I think it would not be superior to the one in the first volume of your songs. Will you have the goodness to give me your opinion on what would be the best, and say what would be the expense of both a painting and engraving ?

I have another request to make. Will you send me by the safest conveyance, which I suppose is the mail, a copy of the songs, including the four volumes ? From the great attention I have experienced at all times from Dr. Maxwell, both as a friend and in the way of his profession,<sup>1</sup> I wish, as a mark of my gratitude, to present him with these songs for his daughters' use. Have the goodness, when you send them, to put in with them a note of the expense, which I shall transmit to you by a friend who intends going to Edinburgh in a few weeks, and who, I expect, will take charge of the picture. I in-

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<sup>1</sup> Maxwell was the doctor who attended Burns in his last illness. He shared in the French Revolution, and narrowly escaped the guillotine.

tend to write to my brother in a few days. Offer my kind and respectful compliments to all the members of your family. Accept of my best wishes for your every prosperity.—Believe me, ever yours with esteem,

JEAN BURNS.

DUMFRIES, 19th Novr. 1817.

Mr. GEO. THOMSON.

Regarding the following letter it is only necessary to remark that Roscoe had vehemently protested against the imputation of faults to his friend Dr. Currie. The vindications of Mr. Gray and Mr. Findlater, it may be added, were inserted by Alexander Peterkin in his edition of Burns' works, published in 1815.

GRANT'S BRAES, 9th Dec. 1817.

I received yours of the twenty-second November accompanying the MS. and Mr. Roscoe's letter. Accept my best thanks for the attention you have bestowed on that subject and for the corrections and emendations you propose, some of which I shall avail myself of. I enclose a letter to Mr. Roscoe open that you may read it. You will see by it I do not intend to take the course respecting Dr. Currie's friends. You say you would not feel hurt at such a course were you in Mr. W. Currie's place, but you see by Roscoe's letter that they are very much disobliged by what I have said already. I have always considered that an elaborate vindication of my brother written by me, though I were much more capable of writing than I am, would be of very little avail, and that my purpose will be much better accomplished by simply affording a vehicle for the facts evidenced by Messrs. Gray and Findlater. I intend publishing the part of Mr. Gray's letter, beginning at page fifteen, as it would be quite indecent in me to be

the vehicle of publishing severe strictures on Dr. Currie or his work. As I intend being in town when you read this, I hope I shall have the pleasure of talking with you on the subject.—I remain, dear Sir, your most obedient humble Servant,

GILBERT BURNS.

[DUMFRIES, 16th July 1818.

MY DEAR SIR,—I deferred answering your first letter until I should receive the books it promised. I have now to thank you for them in my own and my son's name; it is a valuable addition to the other volumes. I have had no opportunity of judging the music, yet I have no doubt that is arranged with your usual good taste to suit the words. The songs are almost all new to me. I observe some of them are written by Mr. Hogg, to whom I beg you will present my best compliments.

I have incurred another very great obligation to you, your attention to the safety as well as to the improvement of Mr. Burns' portrait. It is very elegantly framed, and is a great, indeed the greatest ornament of my little parlour. A letter from Gilbert lately mentions your having refused to charge me with the expence of this costly frame. This is more than I wish or deserve. I am sorry to observe your ailments; yours are of a particularly distressing kind; warm baths seem the order of the day for rheumatism with us. My health is much improved, but I am still very unable to undergo any exertion. I fear I should not be able to climb up stairs if I were in Edinburgh. I have given up all prospect of travelling so far from home this season.

Thank you for your kind inquiries after my sons. From and of James I hear very often; he has been very fortunate in being appointed to the Commissariat Department. The honour done me by the Marchioness of Hastings was on his account; what she said of James was most gratifying. From William, who is on the

Madras establishment, I have not heard for a long time, indeed I feel very uneasy about him. Robert—should have been first—is very well and doing well in London. I have lengthened out this letter too much, more, I fear, than you will easily decypher. My best regards are with you, Mrs. T., and your family.—I am, dear Sir, yours obliged and sincerely,

JEAN BURNS.

The “rough verses to the Lord Breadalbin,” mentioned in the next letter, refer to the poem beginning “Long life, my lord, an’ health be yours.” They had appeared for the first time in the *Edinburgh Magazine* for the preceding February. A copy in the poet’s handwriting is now in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. With regard to the two poems the Burns authorship of which is questioned by Gilbert, that on Pastoral Poetry is certainly open to some doubt. Parts of it have been ascribed to Fergusson, to Hamilton of Gilbertfield, and even to “honest Allan” himself. But the general opinion is that, while Burns may have obtained some suggestions from his predecessors, the piece is practically his own. The ballad on the Battle of Sheriffmuir was of course only touched up by Burns; the original was by the Rev. John Barclay, the Berean minister.

GRANT’S BRAES, 16th July 1818.

DEAR SIR,—I was extremely sorry to learn by yours of the 11th that you had been so ill as to be confined to bed, but hope this will find you in better health. I return the Magazine with my best thanks. I was much pleased with “Lucy’s Flitting,” which I had never met



with till I saw it there.<sup>1</sup> I am not quite determined respecting the publishing the rough verses to the Lord Breadalbin. I meditate an application to Mr. Lumsden for the manuscript of the "Jolly Beggars," through the means of my son William, who I expect will soon be settled in Glasgow or its neighbourhood.<sup>2</sup> I received a letter yesterday from Mrs. Burns dated so far back as the 10th (having been missent from the Edinburgh post-office), and am sorry to learn that she has not sufficiently recovered to venture on a journey hither, which she had intended and promised me. Walking half a mile or any equal fatigue or any unusual agitation of mind exposes her to considerable suffering of pain at the heart. She says, "I received the picture quite safe, and feel infinitely obliged to Mr. Thomson for his unexpected kindness. It looks greatly better and much improved by travelling. I was glad to see it again. Mr. T. mentions in his letter an intention to send me an additional volume of songs; the expectation of this has prevented my writing to him, which I shall do, as soon as I receive it; if you have any communication with him you may mention this." You will probably smile at the honest woman's apology for not writing you, which perhaps I ought to have covered with some periphrasis, but thought you would be amused and pleased with the naked innocence of it.

It strikes me that Dr. Currie has published two poems in the end of the 4th volume as my brother's, which are not his, but which the Dr., having found among his MSS. and in his handwriting, has concluded to be his. The one a poem on "Pastoral Poetry," and the other the ballad following it, on the Battle of Sheriffmuir. This is surely an old ballad. I beg you will look into them and give me your opinion, and if at all doubt-

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<sup>1</sup> "Lucy's Flitting," William Laidlaw's exquisite ballad, was contributed to Hogg's *Forest Minstrel*.

<sup>2</sup> Messrs. Lumsden of Glasgow published *The Jolly Beggars* in facsimile in 1823.



ful I will not give them a place in any edition published under my sanction.

I beg you will present my most respectful compliments to Mrs. Thomson, and hoping to hear that you have got quite rid of your rheumatism, I remain, ever dear Sir, yours sincerely,

GILBERT BURNS.

A letter of June 1819 from Gilbert Burns is devoted mainly to the matter of the heroines of certain of Burns' songs. There is another letter on the same subject, accompanied by a long document giving opposite the title of each song, according to a request of Thomson, "the maiden and married names of heroines, and of what place or places." This part of the correspondence I do not think it necessary to print. Nothing is said about the heroines that is not already known, and a good deal is set down that has since been shown to be inaccurate. The following quotation from Gilbert's June letter may, however, be given :

I only wrote Cadell & Davies yesterday after receiving another letter from them pressing for my answer. I felt so sore on the subject that I had little inclination to write, and besides have been very much occupied of late. I wrote with rather more tartness than I intended ; for when I began, I found it difficult to repress a feeling of injurious treatment. I offered to expunge the paragraph relating to Dr. Currie altogether if that will satisfy his friends, but expressed my fixed determination that if I came forward as editor at all, the appendix I had sent them for the first volume should be brought forward also.

On the 19th of September Gilbert writes to say that he has been at Dumfries on a visit to Mrs.

Burns. An "artist from London" was "fitting up the marble in the mausoleum"; and Gilbert remarks that he is better pleased both with the mausoleum and the marble than he expected to be. He would like to see a plan of the monument to be erected at Alloway; he understands the contractors have been advertised for. "I have," he adds in closing, referring to a bursary for his son, "I have secured the support of Bailie Dunlop to my bursary petition by means of his brother, who is my neighbour, and has lately taken a new farm from Lord Blantyre."

The next two letters will have some value for those who take a special interest in the portraits of Burns. The poet, I suspect, had more of these profile portraits than there is any record of. They were not costly, and it is known that he gave away several.

GRANT'S BRAES, *2nd July 1821.*

MY DEAR SIR,—I received yours of the 27th June. Nasmyth's picture is certainly a pretty good likeness of the poet, and I believe was the sole guide of the artist in preparing the marble figure for the Dumfries mausoleum, and which, without doubt, has some likeness. But I hope Mr. Flaxman will be able to produce a better. I used to think Beugo's engraving from Nasmyth's picture showed more character and expression than the picture itself, but it was the first likeness of my brother I had seen, not having seen the picture till long after, and perhaps the impression then made on my mind may have made me partial to the engraving. I had a copy of the Edinburgh edition with the engraving in it lately, but cannot at present find it, and I do not know any person who has that edition, but I hope mine will yet cast up, and if it does I will send it to you if you have not then

got another. I should suppose Robert Ainslie may have it, and perhaps a proof impression. I have a small black profile done by a Mr. Houghton, which I got from Mr. Alexander Cunningham, but I got it broken bringing it home in my pocket in the coach. The features are distinctly and, I think, pretty exactly delineated, and if you think it can be of any use I will send it. Are you to make any excursion to the country this summer? Will you come and stay a few days with me? I will procure you a quiet pony which will carry you safely on a more deliberate visit to Yester, where you will see the Goblin cave. I beg you will present Mrs. B.'s and my best compliments to Mrs. Thomson and the young ladies, and believe me to be ever, my dear Sir, yours sincerely,

GILBERT BURNS.

GRANT'S BRAES, 24th September 1821.

MY DEAR SIR,—I take the opportunity of John being here to send you the black profile by his return. I have not yet recovered my copy with Beugo's engraving, nor can I find one in this neighbourhood; but as there must be many here, I hope yet to find one or recover my own, and will write you what occurs to me on further and closer examination. From your conversation with Mr. Beugo, however, I think my predilection for his engraving must have arisen from having seen it *first*, and being struck with its resemblance long before I saw Nasmyth's picture. Great caution is necessary to prevent being misled by Beugo's idea of silencing the under lip, as, though the poet brought his lips together when not speaking, yet the lips showed a separation outward, as you will likewise observe in the black profile. To make the poet *mim-mou'd* will not do, and I think the lips of all faces of spirit show a separation outward. Upon the whole, the works of artists who are accustomed to an accurate professional examination of features, and who

were on the alert to produce a good likeness, must be more to be depended upon than the recollection of any person whatever. I am to write to Mrs. Burns in a day or two, and will request her to send Nasmyth's picture to you, as she will be readier to trust it to your care than to a person unknown. Mr. Kerr, one of the magistrates of Dumfries, has a black profile by another artist, which he thinks very like (and he was very familiar with the living face). I will try to prevail with him to send his profile along with Mrs. Burns' picture, and when you get all the likenesses together, write me, and I will come to Edinburgh and examine them with you, and will then be able to determine with more precision which has the greatest resemblance.—I remain, my dear Sir, yours faithfully,

GILBERT BURNS.

DUMFRIES, 8<sup>th</sup> October 1821.

MY DEAR SIR,—By some delay I did not receive your letter of the 27th September till the 2nd of this. I fear you must blame me for allowing so many days to pass without noticing your request. I send off the picture, once more trusting it to your responsibility. I must own I feel an unwillingness to part with it, but when I consider the respect and honour which the nation seems inclined to pay to the memory of its original, I give up my own selfish feeling. I had a letter from my brother Gilbert about the same time as yours, in which he requests me to endeavour to procure a profile in the possession of Provost Kerr. With some difficulty, through the medium of a friend who had to promise his responsibility for its safety, I have at length succeeded. The reason of Mr. Kerr's unwillingness to part with the profile is that he considered it very much injured when last in Edinburgh for a similar purpose. I must therefore recommend it to the particular care of the gentlemen you mention, and trust that it will

be returned with the least possible delay. You have my best thanks for your polite invitation to your city. I have no chance of accepting this year. Another may bring it round ; in the meantime offer my kindest wishes to Mrs. Thomson and all your family. The last accounts from my sons in India were very agreeable ; they are both rising in their profession, and by every account conducting themselves with the greatest propriety. The box that encloses the picture is the same in which it came last from Edinburgh. Should you think it necessary, you can send it to London in a stronger one, and have it made large enough to admit the profile, which is in a small box. By this means it will be safer.—I am, my dear Sir, yours very faithfully, JEAN BURNS.

From the next letter it would appear that Thomson had taken it upon himself to advise Lockhart as to the manner in which he should treat the life of Burns!

GRANT'S BRAES, 19th January 1826.

MY DEAR SIR,—I received your obliging letter enclosing one to Mr. Lockhart, which I approve of most fully. I am afraid, however, he will already have fixed on his mode of treating the subject or probably have most of it written out.

I cannot conceive what could induce him to enter on a subject which has so long been before the public, and which had been so successfully treated by Dr. Currie, but as he writes with vigour, I shall be curious to see how he manages the matter. If he attempt to give any familiar view of the poet's character in the Boswellian style, his work will present false views of the character of the man, and will probably contain some contemptible and injurious gossip.

The last letter I had from Mrs. Burns was toward the end of November. She had not then had any late



intelligence from her sons in India, but I am willing to believe that neither of them are engaged in the Burmese war, though Mrs. Burns does not seem to be informed on the subject.

It is an anxious situation for any one to have connections in, for though the Burmese do not appear to wait on much fighting, the alternate heat and damp of the climate must occasion a great destruction of human life, especially among those who are natives of a more temperate climate. Your kind congratulations on the subject of our young men deserves our best thanks. Thomas's appointment to what I consider a situation of great importance and respectability indeed calls for our most devout thankfulness to the great disposer of events; and Gilbert's appointment, though at present not a lucrative one, is an opening by which he may be introduced to something better, for I have the fullest confidence that he will make himself useful to his employers. I hope the passing years are pressing lightly on Mrs. Thomson, and that no abridgement of enjoying life has been felt by either of you. Some time ago my stomach lost its tone, and I thought I was about to decline very rapidly. Lately, however, I have recovered more strength and vigour than I ever expected to enjoy again.

All now unite in expressions of kindest regard for you and every member of your family, and wishing you all many happy years, I remain, ever my dear Sir, yours with sincere esteem,

GILBERT BURNS.

The following from Colonel Burns explains itself:

CHELTENHAM, *12th April* 1847.

MY DEAR SIR,—I have been favoured with your letter of the 2nd instant, and cannot sufficiently express my thanks for the splendid present you have made me of



the original model of Flaxman's statue of my father. It shall be highly cherished and transmitted to some of the lineal descendants of the poet. When in Edinburgh last, I learnt that some of your friends proposed presenting you with a piece of plate ; I had much pleasure in enrolling myself in their number : it would have added much to the gratification, however, to have been present at its presentation. My brother joins in kind compliments to yourself and family with yours very truly,

W. N. BURNS.

## APPENDED NOTE TO THE LIFE

As stated in the Preface, some scraps of information have been obtained while these sheets were passing through the press.

First, I have discovered that George Thomson was made a "Burgess Guild Brother" of Banff in 1770. He was then only thirteen years old; but it appears that such juvenile burgesses were by no means rare in those days. The Town Clerk of Banff assures me that entries are found in the Treasurer's books of small sums for "confections" and "raisens" with which to entertain them! It does not appear from the accounts that young Thomson got anything in the way of sweets. Thomson was also a burgess of Brechin (1803) and Dundee (1814). I have seen both tickets, but it is curious that in neither case is the name entered in the Burgess Roll.

Second, with regard to Thomson's violins (see pp. 14, 15) I have ascertained that a Nicolas Amati, dated 1675, now in the possession of John Paterson, Esq., Royal Bank House, Maryhill, has a good claim to be regarded as having belonged to the correspondent of Burns. This violin, it seems, was purchased at a sale of Thomson's music and musical instruments in 1839, just before he left

for London. Mr. Paterson holds a letter from the original purchaser, who describes Thomson as "the first amateur performer in Edinburgh." He (the purchaser) adds that "the fiddle must be a first-rate one, as Thomson was a first-rate player, and she [*sic*] is the best fiddle he had in his possession, eight or ten others being sold at the same time belonging to him." Mr. Robert Cox, of Gorgie, M.P., also claims to be in possession of one of Thomson's violins. See the correspondence columns of the *Scotsman*, January 27 and 29, 1892.

Lastly, with reference to Thomson's Church connection, his grand-daughter, Miss Georgina Hogarth, says in a recent letter: "I believe he was an Episcopalian during the latter part of his life, but he belonged to the Scottish Church originally, as I know my mother [see p. 12] was married according to that ritual in her father's house, and we were all baptized in the Scottish Church."

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